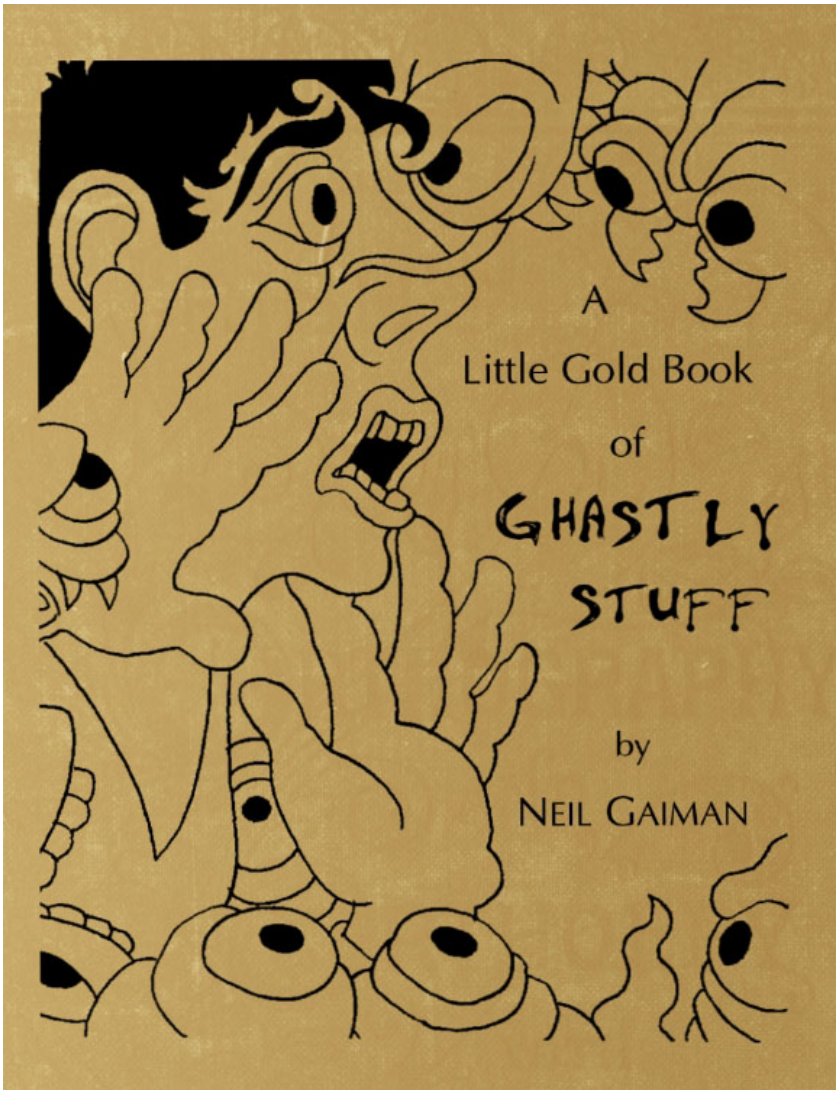
A
Little Gold Book
of
GHASTLY
STUFF
by
NEIL GAIMAN

A Little Gold Book of Ghastly Stuff

by

Neil Gaiman

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DEDICATION

Because some friends are golden, and because they become family, this little book is for Peter Nicholls and Clare Coney and for John and Judith Clute. With gratitude.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Tom and Elizabeth Monteleone for encouraging me in this madness, and to thank Shield Bonnichsen who suggested including a number of rare and unusual things I've written, none of which I wound up putting in here, mostly because by the time the attic cooled off enough to go hunting for old clippings up there, I'd already filled up this book with other things, both ghastly and golden.

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INTRODUCTION

I have always thought that "B Sides and Rarities" would make a good name for a collection like this.

But there are no B sides any longer. Not really. I mean, sure, there's Vinyl, but in the olden days, when dinosaurs walked the Earth and I saw bankers in bowler hats go to work on the train every morning, we bought our songs on 45 revolutions per minute seven inch disks called singles. And because all such disks are, by their nature and the way the universe is made, two-sided, the song you wanted to buy was the A side, and another song that you'd never heard of was the B side. When albums came out they would often not have the singles on them, and even if they had the single, the B side would be nowhere to be seen. (I am told that the composer of the song on the B side made as much as the composer on the A side, and that many fortunes were made by managers or publishers or record company men putting their songs on the B sides.)

For an author the B sides are the things that you write that nobody notices when you write them, and that remain uncollected, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes not.

"Featherquest" has been uncollected and unreprinted since its first publication, in 1984. I wrote it when I was 22, and it was my first professional sale, to *Imagine Magazine*. (Colin Greenland suggested I send it to them.) *Imagine*'s only condition for publishing the story was that I cut it from 8,000 words to 4,000, so I did. (Or perhaps they cut it themselves. Anyway, somebody cut it.)

I was disappointed when I read the published story, convinced it was only half as good as the one that I had written.

And then, as I wrote more, and I learned how to write stories and to end them, I decided that neither version had been particularly good, and I would let them both fade and be forgotten.

Some years ago I took the second story that I had sold to *Imagine*, "How to Sell the Ponti Bridge" and I tidied it up a little and put it in my collection *M is for Magic*. "Featherquest" however, never called me to tidy it up, and the version you read here is the complete version and it's the version I wrote when I was 22. Looking at it today, it's like a collage of authors I liked. I'm not sure there's a

sentence that actually sounds like me.

"Jerusalem" was commissioned by Lu Kemp at BBC Radio Four for their William Blake celebrations. I was told to write something inspired by a Blake poem, and I wrote a story inspired by a peculiar morning I had spent in Jerusalem. I found myself frustrated by the limitations of length on radio, and it was cut further before it was broadcast to fit its time slot. This is the first time it's been printed.

"Feminine Endings" was written for a volume of *Love Letters*. When I first met my wife she told me she had once been a human statue and I sent her this story.

"Orange" was written in airports. I based the narrator on Ms. Hayley Campbell, and loved writing a story that was only answers. It was written for editor Jonathan Strahan, and has been anthologized several times, although not yet collected. One day I'll write a short story that's just questions.

"Orphee" was written for a CD liner notes, and it was for the late Kathy Acker.

"Ghosts in the Machines" was written for the *New York Times* Editorial page at Hallowe'en. It's almost an op-ed piece.

I'm not a book reviewer. I was when I was young—it was a marvelous way to feed my book habit and to find books that I would otherwise have never encountered. Nobody cared if a snotty young journalist, often pseudonymous because he was writing too much for too many people, liked or didn't like a book. These days I can muster no enthusiasm for being cleverly rude about a bad book (there are so many bad books, and there are people who loved to write them and loved to read them, and why would I try and spoil anyone's fun?) and if I am going to read a good book I would rather I were reading it for pleasure and that it did not feel like work.

But there is a dialogue about books, a dialogue between the reviewers and the reviewed, and it is a good thing to feel part of that dialogue. So I waver, from time to time, and review a book for an editor who asks me at the right moment. I have included a few of those book reviews here.

The journalism is self-explanatory. Well, I hope it is. The Oscars piece was meant to be about the Oscars, but it really isn't. It's about the melancholy days when everyone else is celebrating and you do not know how. The piece on Fairy Tales was written for the

Guardian when *Stardust The Movie* came out. The Dresden Dolls article was written for *Spin Online*, and was as honest a piece of writing as I've ever managed.

There's an introduction to a Brian Aldiss book here; a couple of extracts from my blog at www.neilgaiman.com which have, in their own way, gone on to have lives away from the blog; and two very different speeches, both delivered at awards ceremonies.

And as for the poetry, the poems here gave me pleasure in the writing. One poem is a warning and instruction for readers, made into a beautiful print by letterer Todd Klein, another is an account of a visit to a trout farm with my wife before she was even my girlfriend.

My thanks to Tom and Elizabeth Monteleone for allowing me to display some of my B-sides and my rarities in public. I hope you enjoy them, and I trust that somewhere in these ghastly pages you find something golden. Or that somewhere in this golden volume you find something ghastly.

I'm easy …

—Neil

Before You Read This

Before you read this familiarise yourself
with the text. Note the position of the escape hatches,
the candles that will light in the event of a forced landing
to show you the way out. The author will make an
announcement.

Before you read this watch the moon.
Note the golden colour as it rises
the way it pales and shrinks when it is high in the sky.

Before you read this remember: Do not
read these words in order. Make your path. Start in
the middle. End at the
beginning.

Before you read this do something else.
The water is high in the creek from
snow-melt. Overhead the geese are honking
an arrowhead. Fly with them.

Before you read this purify yourself. Remove
your clothes and walk through the fire.
Forget all you have learned.
Forget your letters.

Before you read this write it down. Take a candle
and your childhood into an attic. Make a
paper house of books and dreams and
burn it to ash.

Before you read this.

Before you read this let your heart dissolve,
the words made mould
and mist and memories. (Leave the memories
inside the paper house you burned.)

Before you read this ride the night train.
Do not sleep. Encounter people you remember,
now long dead, and read to them.

Before you read this
battle zombies,
watch your step, trust no one,
kiss without thinking.

Before you read this
perform a small miracle.

Before you read this. Before you.

Before you read this,
read these instructions. Commit them to
memory. (The only ways out are
booby-trapped.)

Before you read this, listen to the silence,
perfect and entire. Resolve not to read anything
not any longer, not ever, not again.
If possible, first attain Nirvana.

Before you read this summon genies and spiders
all the king's huntsmen
and follow the trail of the author through the dark wood
from tree to tree, until it vanishes.

Before you read this make your will
and pray.
Say goodbye to your loved ones. Know it
will change nothing.

Before you read this leave your room.
Leave everything. Walk naked into the darkness
that has no words, in which there are no words,
in which all reading is over. Before you read this.

Before you read this.

Before you read.

FEATHERQUEST

This is a tale they tell in ancient Khem, late at night when the fires are low and the candles are liquefying in their sticks; in Derana they tell it and the Tromilly; sailors tell it on the long passage down the River Xyths, that does not flow into the sea; the folk of the small islands of Andar, Vandar, Sandar and Giff also know of it, but in Kharan they do not know it, and in Fasstiarelle of the sleepy towers they only tell it in odd-numbered months. In the marshes of Fogpool, where tax-collectors fear to tread they tell it, and in Scryrrh it is told in the market places, by old men. They do not tell it in the city of Lost Carnadine, though I have spoken to one who claimed to have seen it written in a garbled from upon the walls of a public convenience in that remarkable city.

They call it the Tale of the Dreamer, and it begins in such a fashion:

There was in the city of Melk'arn, which is the capital of Nia (of the seven deserts) a certain man, whom men called Road, which means, Constant, and he lived in the poorer part of the city in a house that had been his father's and *his* father's before him: for know you that the fortunes of men and cities change even as the gods decree, and in far off days Roan's ancestors were accounted among the nobility and were blessed with great fortune.

Alas, those days were long gone and Roan lived alone in the crumbling house without servant or concubine, and spent his days and nights studying the old books and parchments that were all his father had left when he quit this life. Young Roan was reduced to selling the tapestries and carpets of the house to buy food and candles wherewith to exist and to read at night, and in this he was frugal, for he bought the cheapest cuts of meant, and the last fruit from the vendor's barrows, also he bought candles of bibble wax, that smoked and stenched, rather than candles of bees wax or berry wax. In this way Roan passed his days: when his father died Road was eighteen years of age, and when the tale starts his two and twentieth birthday had just come and gone, a fact which our hero did not remark upon, for in his dusty library all days were one, and he scarcely reckoned between them.

It came to pass that one night Roan slept in the library, as he

often did, his head on a manuscript pillow. And sleeping he dreamed a dream so cunningly fashioned that he was hard put to tell that he was not awake. For in his dream a stranger came to him and by certain signs roan knew that the stranger was not a man but a djinn, for his eyes neither white nor iris nor pupil, but were instead made of flame, but withal he was passing comely to look upon.

"Roan," he said. "Roan."

"That is me, Lord," said Roan for he was a well-mannered youth.

"Roan," said the djinn, "I have come to tell you of your fortune. Say naught, but listen. You must leave this city and take ship for the Far Reaches; arriving at the port of Rilmereee you must travel by camel to Pundondeor, where bad taste is considered a virtue and all men (and women too, if the truth be known) are improper, indelicate, ribald and obscene, and where they tell the tale of The Day That Abu Hassan Broke Wind while seated at the dinner table and *before* the dessert.

"From Pundender you must travel on foot down the popply road to Thelicum, where the bandit-wizards have their court, and from there to Utter Haslet, where the Pittites are, and the Pit. You must cross the Rutty Mountains until you are come to the bounds of the Calyx Empire. Take horse and from there to the capital city of Captandum, where you must go to the house of the Emperor wearing red britches, a green belt, and on you head a purple hat, and great fortune and happiness shall be yours."

At this Road was much amazed, but he said nothing. "To prove to you that it is no mere dream," continued the djinn, "I leave you this." And with that he plucked a feather from his turban and placed it between the youth's fingers. Then he vanished, and Roan sank into a dreamless sleep.

As the first fingers of dawn brushed the sky he awoke. "That was a strange dream," he though. "I must have been reading too many of the old romances." Then he looked down and saw that between the fingers of his right hand was a feather, the selfsame feather that the djinn had taken from his turban.

"Oh," thought Roan.

He knew then that it had been no dream, but a true telling of things to come, and straightway he went down to the harbour to

arrange passage on a ship to the Far Reaches.

For if there was one thing that Roan had learned from his books it was that such dreams were not to be ignored, “Although,” he thought “I do wish that the journey to great fortune were not going to be so perilous. I have no wish to visit Thelicum or its bandit-wizards, and the tales men tell of Utter Haslet (not to mention the Pit or the unlikeable Pittities) are not calculated to fill one with pleasure; on the contrary, in fact.”

So saying he sighted and made the preparations to sell his house and all in it save the library, which he stored at the house of his father’s brother. He had sworn an oath to his father that the library would never be sold. Due to the speed with which he had to sell he gained only six hundred gold coins for the sale, of which seventy went at once to the ship’s captain. He carried some of these coins in a belt around his waist and the rest in the false bottom of this travelling bag. In the rest of his travelling bag he had some volumes of poetry and some clothes (amongst which were a purple hat and red britches); also he took his toothbrush.

Nine days after he dreamed his dream (if dream it truly were) the ship set sail for the Far Reaches, and Roan stood on the deck and watched the land recede into the horizon. A Sailor came to him, offering wine to guard against the sea-sickness that can come to travelers.

“Sea-sickness” laughed Road. “Why, when I was a boy I would go out with the fishermen, and never have I felt or been—bloooughhh!”

He watched his lunch blow past in the westerly wind, from which it was eagerly snatched by passing gulls, washed his mouth out with wine and went below to his cabin. He lay in his bunk and moaned, sure that he would die and that his quest would be over before it was begun: every lurch and roll of the ship only served to convince him that his demise was indeed imminent.

Several hours later an even more unpleasant though crossed his mind; perhaps he would *not* die. Groaning he pulled the blanket over his head and drifted into a fitful sleep, only to be awakened by the captain, who had come to see how his sole passenger was faring. Roan mustered what little strength he had and feebly asked when the storm would subside.

“Storms?” repeated the captain. “Why the sea is as flat as the millpond. We aren’t likely to get any storms until we round the Tur’hian Cape. It can get pretty choppy around the Tur’hian Cape.” he added with grisly relish, and quite unnecessarily Roan felt.

Even so, within the week he had left his cabin and would wander over the ship getting in the sailors’ way. Two or three of them were all for throwing him overboard, but staider heads prevailed, and in ta while the sailors gre to like him—as much as a sailor can like any man that will not drink rhum, or learn the correct way to tap the maggots out of his sea-biscut-or if no like him, tolerate him and there was many a dry eye when he walked down the gangplank at Far Reaches, his bag over his shoulder.

The Port of Rilmeree was cosmopolitan in the extreme. Dark-skinned merchants rubbed shoulders with fair courtesans (I believe that rubbing shoulders was gesture of affection; anyway it’s a lot of fun) and dwarfish Faiorislers haggled with fat-assed amazons. Roan gaped at them all. Three identical sisters laughed at him.

“Hick,” they jeered, “Hick, hick, hicketty-hick.”

Roan made a long nose at them, which convulsed them into giggles, and they passed on down the street.

He stopped at the stall of a seller of fruit. “Where can I find the camel-trains?” he asked the man.

“If I spent my days answering the questions of itinerant boobies,” the slller of fruit replied, “I should starve. However I often give unsolicited information about the city to those who purchase my fine fruits.”

Roan purchased half a dozen pomegranates. The man told him where the Halls of Judgments were found. Roan purchased a measure of Loy nuts. The man told him where in the city the brothels were located, and how much he would be expected to pay. Gritting his teeth, Roan purchased a large melon. The man told him where the street of the gods of the Far Reaches was found, and what sacrifices were deemed acceptable. Roan drew his dagger and held it to the man’s throat.

“Where, low miscreant, can I find the camel-trains?”

“No idea,” shrugged the fruit seller.

“Then I shall be forced to cut your throat.”

The fruit-seller raised an eyebrow. “I do not know,” he said, but on that wall behind you is a map of the city. It’ll be on there.”

There was indeed a map on the wall, and Roan found the Place of the Camel-trains, which was just outside the Western Gate, with little difficulty. However, whilst he examined the map someone threw a rotting love-apple at his head,. No-one admitted to the deed when Roan enquired.

Cracking the Loy nuts with his teeth, our hero walked down Shill Street towards the Western Gate. He gave pennies to the beggars, until he had no more pennies, whereupon he gave them Loy nuts. Having no teeth with which to crack the nuts the beggar-folk were displeased and, by signaling to confederates, arranged for buckets of nightsoil to be emptied on Roan’s head.

When he was in sight of the Western Gate Roan once more spied the three sisters, who giggled and held their noses in an exaggerated fashion.

Of the five camel-trains at the westerly gate but one was traveling to Pundondor, and it was with the hetman of that train that Road haggled for the rest of theat afternoon. The hetman was tall, with pepper-and-salt hair, a halo of white stubble on this dusky chin, and the wine-red nostrils that proclaimed him a user of *s’hung* - that drug that takes a man to strange worlds (and simultaneously destroys his sense of smell,. In this Roan was fortunate.) They settled on the sum of forty gold pieces and the melon.

Roan decided that riding a camel was marginally worse than his shipboard experiences, especially when he lost the tip of the little finger of his right hand to one of the animals.

“It was your own fault. I told you to keep your fingers away from his mouth,” said the hetman, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

Roan felt sick most of the time. The insides of his thights were red and crusted with sores; (the tip of the little finger on his right hand was gone, but luckily didn’t get infected); he was covered from head to food with the bites of ticks, lice and fleas; he was miserable, and only cheered himself up by thinking of the djinn with the fiery eyes, and fingering the feather, and pondering on the wonderful future beyond the horizon. The future that awaited him in Captandum, outside the house of the Calyx Emperor.

Scratching furiously he wondered what it would be. From his

extensive readings he could only see three alternatives:

1) A rich man would see him and adopt him as his son, he would marry the princess and become Calyx Emperor upon the present incumbent's demise.

2) The Calyx Emperor himself would see Roan, adopt him as his son, and upon his death Roan would marry the princess ad become Emperor himself.

3) The princess herself would upon seeing Roan, fall deeply and all-consumingly in love with him, refusing to take food or water until Roan was brought to her bed. (Roan's ears flushed an embarrassed red at the thought of this). After a comfortable week or so in bed they would marry, the Calyx Emperor would shuffle off this mortal coil and Roan in his turn would become Calyx Emperor.

Whichever way you looked at it his prospects were rosy.

In three weeks of bottombusting stomach turning pelf stinging sandburning travel they arrived at Pundondor, and three days later Roan set off down the popply road to Thelicum. Of Pundondor I will say nothing. Children may be reaping, or people with weak hearts, and any mention of Pundondor would be offensive to most: for the men are all cads, bounders and rotters, the women are floozies, hoydens and frumps; all is coarse and vulgar, tawdry and rude. I shall not tell of the competitions in the roads from which Roan averted his eyes, nor of the tales that he heard, nor of the practical jokes that were played on him.

Roan left the city on foot and at night, but he slept in a tree rather than tread the popply road to Thelicum in the darkness. He made his bag into a pillow, and dreamed the dreams of one who rests his head upon gold.

At sunrise he set off down the road, which churned and bubbled beneath his feet, roiling and swirling. Thrice he was all but swallowed up by whirlpools and crevasses that opened up before his feet. He saw no other travelers.

"OOOOOOO," Roan groaned. "First the sea, then the camels, the beds of Pundondor, and now this road that will not stay still and sensible but instead churns and ferments like a rough sea playing at earthquakes. oooooo."

The popply road grew ever more wild, until all of a sudden it became flat and still and a road like any other, and before him Roan

saw the bulbous towers of Thelicum. These towers were most strange, being of beaten copper covered with the hides of wild beasts Unusual and disturbing ululations rent the air and Roan heard the pounding of irregular hoof-beats far down the road.

“Yuckaaa! Yucjalalalalakaaa!” shouted the bandit-wizards, thudding down the road towards him, all mounted on five-legged donkeys and waving their swords over their heads in a menacing fashion.

They encircled Roan, then dragged him back to Thelicum with them, bound to the underside of a five legged donkey, the earth scraping the shirt and the skin from his back.

“Yuckaaaa! Yucjalalalalakaaa!” screamed their captive as a particularly large rock raked the length of his back.

In this fashion did Roan of Melk’arn come to the city of Thelicum.

And in the city of Thelicum Roan was imprisoned for the first time on his travels, in a deep dark dank dungeon where the light of day was never seen, and green glommy things oozed down the walls and the rats had aqualungs and the frogs wore fur coats; and Roan was disconsolate. “Oh, what an unhappy wretch I am, “he sobbed. “for my bag (containing not only my red britches and purple hat, but also some slim volumes of poetry and my financial reserves, excluding those concealed elsewhere) has been taken from me, and I shall die in these uncongenial surroundings and I shall never get to Captandum, nor ever find my fortune. Oh lackaday, miseree.”

“Did I hear tha’ say that them grollockin knavies ha’ a-took of tha’ slim volumes of poetry?” croaked a voice from a dark corner.

“Sorry?” asked Roan, unable to understand a word.

“The scrummtin’ futtocks mun taken tha’ poetry, tha’ said, ifn’n oi aheard thee aright.”

Roan nodded, then realizing that a nod was a useless as any other inaudible gesture in that stygian blackness said “Yes. They did.”

“That mun be a shame, reckon. Tes a terrible thing when a man baint keep his own poetry,” ruminated the voice.

“Please sir, who are you?”

“Ai lad, tha’ baint needs to say ‘sir’ to such as oi, though oncet men would bend they over backwards as to say ‘sir’ to Domesday Thresher’s son. Oi be but a prisoner, belike to the’ self.”

“But who are you?”

The voice breathed a slow, sad sigh. “once,” said the voice. “When an’ before tha’ were a fingerling youth, oi were him as builded this city, him as turned it from a little village as we called Lesser Grommets (so as to distinguish it from Upper Grommets, Grommet-on-the-World, Grommet-in-they-Marshes, and feculent Grommetton) to this ‘ere Thelicum, that were a fine city in its day, oi tell ‘ee. Baint it be the truth.”

“You mean that you were a bandit-wizard?”

“*Were*, lad? *Were*? I were the greatest of the bandit-wizardses-aye, and oi be that still, were truth known, which it baint, on account of they scunnet-faced boggers that do ‘ave a-locked of old Barnsman Thresher under earth, and under stone, and under cold, cold iron. Oi makes up poems, know thee.”

Roan made a certain noise in the back of his throat, one that expressed interste and pleasure at this news but did not actually ask for a recital.

“Aye, oi makes up poetry, often about the cruel captivity oi’ve been subjected to these five-and-twenty years. Come Lammas-tide. That were why my heart misgave within me when oi heard tha’ say as they had tooken away tha’ slim volumes of poetry. “Tes a cruel and scandalous thing that oi maun never allow to happen when *oi* were king. Even if we be lockin’ summun up in the dark, even if we be a-scollocking off of his head or his alleytaws, or even a-sacrificing mun to dhe dark gods, mun could keep his slim volumes of poetry. “Tes terrible times as ‘ave come to Thelicum,” he concluded.

Roan Sympathized.

“Nay, lad. Dinna tha’ worry about old Barnsman Thresher. For Barnsman Thresher do have summat up ‘is sleeve that not even they clettering cokalorum upstairs do wot of. Watch.”

An eerie green light illuminated the dungeon, revealing a wizened old man crouched in a corner. “For five -and-twenty eyars have I waited and bided my time, planning my revenge; and tonight the time be here. Chemash! Milcom! Abiram! Korah! Dathan! Atroapos, Atrapos, Atrapos!”

There was a low rumbling far under the ground.

“Earthquake!” hissed Barnsman Thresher. “They baint heard the last of Domesday Thresher’s son.” And then, in a different tone of voice he added:

“Oi had a hell-hound,

Awuffy, fluffly hell-houdn,

Oi called my hell-houd

Mortimer Fang.

But Nan said it were naughty,

Nan said it were nasty,

The night oi made my fluffly,

wuffy

hound

go

BANG!”

“That be from my forthcoming work, as oi’ve entitled, albeit tentatively, “When We Be Very Nasty’, it be,” said Barnsman Thresher, as the wall on their left fell in.

Together they clambered out of the dungeon and up into the palace. Roan’s bag lay on a table in an anteroom, and he slung it over his shoulder as they went into the street. All around them people were running and scraming.

“Oi mun told them as no good would come of a-locking up of Domesday Thresher’s son. Oi mun told they golluppy skillets,” the old man remarked with gloomy satisfaction.

Roan thanked him for all his help and, after presenting him with on of the volumes of poetry, enquired after the road to Utter Haslet. The old man shook his head.

“You maun don’t want to go there, lad,” he said. “A terrible place, that is. Still, boys will be boys and youth must have its fling. Aye, were every goose a swan, lad, and every dog its day ….”

A large chunk of masonry fell from a nearby building, missing them by scant inches.

“It be a-down that way, past the blasted oak and left at the old gibbet. But be tha’ sure tha’ do not want to stay for un volcano that do be a-coming? Oi allus enjoy a good volcano.”

Roan apologized, thanked the old man once more, and set off down the road that ex-king Barnsman had pointed to.

“He seemed a kindly old soul,” thought our here,” but I wish I had been able to understand what he was talking about.” And with his bag over his shoulder he hurried on down the road, frequently passed by worried men and women on five-legged donkeys.

The volcano was not very impressive when it finally occurred.

Utter Haslet came in sight two days later, nestling at the foot of the Rutty Mountains. Roan was painfully hungry, and the skin on his back stung and burned and chafed, and his other injuries (both to his body and pride) were little better. He had originally intended to avoid Utter Haslet if possible, but he was tired and hungry.

“And did the djinn not say that my future awaits me in Captandum?” thought Roan. “Despite all that I have gone through I still live, and I am sure that nothing in Utter Haslet could be worse than the indignities I have already been put to.” So saying he strode into the town of Utter Haslet, found an inn, had lunch and slept the clock around in a goose-feather bed.

On awakening he went down to the inn and ordered more food, which was set before him. The room was empty, save for a tall, dour man clad all in blakck, who stood by the door. Roan invited him to partake of the luncheon.

“Eat with you?” echoed the stranger. “Aye, that I will.” And he seated himself at Roan’s table, although he ate but sparingly of the food thereon.

Roan’s attention was caught by a golden trinket around the stranger’s neck. It was fashioned in the shape of something that was neither spider nor jellyfish nor yet a woman, but reminded Roan of first one and then another. He commented on it to the saturnine stranger, who made a pious sign with his hands.

“What is its significance?” asked Roan.

“That is one of the Mysteries of the Pit, but withal you will know soon enough,” said his guest.

“I take it that you are a Pittite,” said our hero courteously.

“Aye, I am one of the Sons of the Pit.”

Roan pored himself a generous measure of wine. “And what does that mean?”

“It means that I am of the elect, and that it is my task to greet visitors to Utter Haslet, and to give them the opportunity of learning of the Mystery of the Pit, and of becoming ingested into its Mysteries.” The stranger drew a long, straight sword and put the tip of it to our beleaguered heros throat. “I thank you for the food, stranger,” he said grimly. “Now, come.”

Roan picked up his bag and followed the Son of the Pit. On the far side of town they came to a deep pit, blacker than midnight and stark as a grave.

At the edge of that pit they paused. A score of the drab-clad Pittites, all tall and unsmiling, stood around gazing into the deaths of the pit with intent, unblinking eyes.

“Would I be correct in assuming,” asked Roan of his captor, “that the image that you wear around your neck is a representation of something that, uh, resides in the Pit?”

The Son of Pit nodded.

Roan paled.

“How—how big is it?”

The tall man shrugged. “it is written in the Book of the Pit, ‘And behold, I shall come out of the nether caverns and I shall take my place in the Pit. And my hunger shall be great, and my needs shall not be insignificant. Of eyes shall I have sight, and of limbs I shall have eight, and on the flesh of men shall I feed me. And my size shall be that of an elephant, only bigger.’”

“Great,” said Roan.

The Pittites knotted a hefty rope around Roan’s chest and lowered him into the Pit.

The Pit was deep, and Roan was most uncomfortable as they lowered him into it. The rope burned his skin, and often he would be swung against the sides. When one particularly large outcrop of rock had almost claimed his brains he called up, “Hey! Sons of the Pit! If you want me to reach the bottom of your Pit alive you had better take more care!” After that there was a lighter touch on the rope, and he reached the bottom without serious mishap.

The pit floor was so far below the surface that Roan could see the night sky and constellation of the Hanged Man far above, though it was noon and all daylight outside, and he had seen no stars above

the ground. The Pit floor was of undressed stone, with a scattering of bones, clothes and swords -- many of them partly chewed or dissolved--that lay higgledy-piggledy on the floor.

“I do not like the looks of this,” Roan muttered, and the sight of the Dweller in the Pit scuttling discreetly from behind one boulder to the next did nothing to reassure him. Quite how many legs and eyes it had Roan could not tell in the gloom, however it was unquestionably the size of an elephant, only bigger.

It moved almost soundlessly, a segment of deeper black in the inky shadows. A scuttering, then silence. Roan re-assured himself by telling himself that he had had a dream and a feather that made his survival a virtual certainty; however he was not very convincing, and when something brushed his face he gave himself up for dead. Another scuttering in a far corner caught his attention.

“Either there is more than one of these Things,” he though, “or else it was not the foot (or worse) of a Thing that brushed my cheek.”

He turned slowly to discover the rope, which was being slowly hauled up and out of the Pit by the grim gentlemen above. The rope was now almost a foot over his head, and he caught held of it with both hands and gripped it tightly. At once it stopped moving upwards.

“Frustrate me, would you?” muttered Roan. “Well, even if you won’t haul me out of this blasted Pit I can still climb!” and he started to the floor of the Pit once more. “Caitiff, degenerate, rotten blighters!” he shouted. “Pandering, perverted, scabstinking …” words failed him briefly “… grollocking knavies!”

And with that he seized the rope and gave it the strongest tug he could, to let the Sons of the Pit know exactly what he thought of them. From the corner of his eye he noticed something a little like a spider and little like a jellyfish and somewhat like to a woman had taken advantage of his inattention to slip further towards him. He noticed also that the rock was dissolving and smoking where the dripping ichor from the beasts jaws touched it. Roan gave himself up for the dead again, sat down and prepared to meet his doom.

There was sound from far above him.

The rope started to pour and coil onto the floor of the Pit.

Squinting upwards, Roan made out three rapidly falling shapes

and he guessed, correctly as it turned out, that his final tug on the rope had had more effect on the sons of the Pit than Roan had dreamed.

The Pittites spattered onto the floor, each with his own distinctive thud, and the Dweller scittered away. She waited for almost a minute, her luminous eyes staring out of the shadows, until she felt sure that this was no trick but a genuine windfall, scittered back and proceeded to devour her erstwhile worshippers. She was half way through the third when she noticed that the living sacrifice had gone, probably down one of the myriad tunnels that honeycombed that base of the Pit. She gave the spidery-jellyfish equivalent of a shrug and returned to her dessert.

Roan ran without stopping for mile after mile along dark and narrow tunnels, always choosing those that sloped upwards, often stumbling and falling and skinning his knees and hands and knocking his head, his heart thumping in his ears and threatening to burst out of his chest. He was panting and sweating. He ached in his legs and chest.

When finally he saw the light of day at the end of a tunnel he fell upon his knees and gave thanks to every god from Abiros to Zyxwths, many demigods, and also his djinn. He left the tunnel and found himself on a ledge, high in the Rutty Mountains and gazing down on the tiny town of Utter Haslet, doll-like far below him.

Wrapping himself in a coat from his bag (which he had kept by his side-though all his vicissitudes), he set himself against the wind and trudge off, up and over the Rutty Mountains. The wind blew colder and colder, and the trees and bushes more and more sparse. Frost bite caught at his extremities, and apart from a couple of snow-rabbits he found little food in his travels. It was only by somehow dragging his aching body onwards that Roan had prevented himself from freezing to death. He slept in caves and in the crooks of trees, covered with all his clothes, his feet in his traveling bag. Five days he was in the mountains, and at the end of the fifth day he reached a small inn that marked the bounds of the Calyx Empire, and he stayed there recuperating for over a week. Through rare good fortune he had lost no body-parts from the frost-bite, and as soon as he was able he set out for Captandum, mounted on a zebra-striped stallion.

He found the horse for easier to ride than the camel had been.

Captandum, the capital city, was almost four-score *farsakh* off, and even by horse this was several weeks travel, Roan found his store of money dwindling fast, especially after a week and a half's travel when the zebra-striped stallion took cold and died, forcing him not only to purchase a replacement, but also to pay for the horse's funeral. A very expensive affair.

When he arrived in the Calyx city of Captandum, mounted on a dapple-gray mare, he had but two hundred and fifty gold coins left.

In all his travels Roan had seen nothing to compare with Captandum of the tranced towers, for the very cobbles of the street were sem-precious stones such as amethysts, and chaleedony, and rainbow obsidien; white were the buildings, with golden balconies, on which the young folk of the city lounged, playing on silver lyres; the merchantrs each had wide and spacious stores in which their wares were tastefully displayed - jewels in great barrels and wines in lambent carafes; right nobly were the gentlefolk dressed, and man-coloured waterfalls played down the sides of buildings.

Roan donned his red britches and green belt and purple hat in a nearby convenience, then tehtered his horse and took up his vigil outside the ohouse of the Calyx Emperor, which was no house but a palace.

Now it iso happened that a scant week before this the daughter of the Calyx Emperor had dreamed a dream, and in this dream she was instructed thus: That a black-haried youth from far-off His (of the seven deserts), wearing red britches, a green belt, and a purple hat would come to the palace; that he was fated to be her hustband, and, through his wisdom, the saviour of The Calyx Empire in a time of great need. She related this dream to her father and to the court magician, and the court magician adjudged it a true dream from certain signs and portents. Thus it was that each day the Princess Telalela and her father the Calyx Emperor, and the court magician would stroll around the palace. For seven days there had been no-one that answered her dream's description, but on this day, as they approached the main gate, they caught sight of Roan.

"Tell me," said the princess to the court magician. "What colour is his hat?"

"Purple, and it please your majesty."

"And what colour are his britches?"

“Red, and it please your majesty.”

“And what colour is his belt?”

“His belt is green, and it please your majesty.”

“It is he!” she hissed, and her father and the magician nodded.

Roan watched the procession approach. The court magician, a white-haired sage in a long brown gown inscribed with goetic signs, left the other two and coame over to him. “I greet you, traveler. How do you call yourself, and from whence do you come?”

“My name is Roan, and I have come from Melk’arn.” replied our hero.

“And--hum, ha, --where is Melk’arn?”

“In Hla (of the seven deserts).”

The magician covertly signalled to the Emperor and the princess making a circle of his thum and first finger.

“And what is your profession, young man?”

“I am a scholar, sire.”

The magician was satisfied, and he gestured for the Calyx Emperor and the princess to join them.

Roan was struck dumb when he saw the princess, and when she smiled at him his heart almost forgot to beat. Her eyes, he thought, are twin stars; her mouth a rosebud; her breasts are twin doves and her hair was spun from the stuff of the sun itself. All this he thought, and more, and like one in a dream he dropped to one knee and doffed his purple hat.

The princess looked like someone had just slapped her with a herring.

“Look!” she exclaimed. “His hair!”

For Roan’s hairs was a deep and rusty red.

“A trick,” muttered the court magician, who hated to be wrong.

“Make a fool of us, would he?” enquired the Calyx Emperor Himself. “Take him down to the deepest dungeon, starve him until Thursday, torture him all weekend, and we’ll have a public execution Monday lunchtime. In the Square of the Scented Nightingales.”

Guards sprang forth, seemingly from nowhere, threw Roan to the

ground and then dragged him off to the deepest dungeon, where, alone and friendless, he was immured.

He lay on the floor of the cell, his bag serving him once more as a pillow, a thin trickles of dark blood oozing from his nose and from the corner of his mouth. “There is something unfair about this,” he mourned.” I have been sea-sick, covered in ordure, bitten by camel, flea, tick and louse, subjected to the indignities of Pundondor, rocked on the popply road, tied to the underside of a five-legged donkey, imprisoned, earthquaked, almost volcanoed, flung into a pit, almost eaten byt the Thing in the Pit, hurt, lost underground, frozen in the high mountains, starved, sold an unsound horse, lost most of my money, and finally, when my recompense and reward was nigh I have been thrown into a deep and disgusting dungeon (and, I should add, grossly mishandled by the guards) where I now face impending torture, starvation and death. It is not just, neither is it fair.”

Plunging his hands into his bag he found a bedraggled feather, which he gripped tightly, and then reciting to himself certain words he had learned from his father’s manuscripts in those faraway days in Melk’arn, he drifted into a lucid sleep.

In his dream the djinn of the fiery eyes stood before him. “You called?” yawned the djinn.

Roan briefly outlined his situation.

The djinn shook his head. “I can’t understand it,” he pondered. “You’re *meant* to have black hair. It isn’t well, a sort of … reddish-black, is it?”

“Of course not!” exclaimed Roan. “It’s red as a brick, and always has been. Can’t you *see*?”

“Nope,” apologized the djinn. “It’s one of the liabilities of having flames for eyes. Color-blind. Even so …” he fumbled in this pouch and pulled out a scroll.” … mmm, mm … mm … here we are. ‘Visit Roan son of Frayne’ -- that’s you—’Tell him to leave Melk’arn and take ship for the Far Reaches …”

“It isn’t me!” interrupted Roan.

“Of course it’s you,” corrected the djinn. “Now where was I? Oh yes, ‘take ship for the Far Reaches; arriving at the port of Rilmeree …’.”

"It *isn't* me! I'm Roan son of Strepitus!"

The djinn gazed down at Roan with fiery eyes, sighed, then rolled up the scroll and put it away. "Eblis!" he swore. "The wrong blasted address. And on my first job too." He pulled a lace handkerchief from his pouch and dabbed at his eyes, then sniffed, saying, "I hope you're satisfied—that's all. I hope you're pleased with yourself. Trophanie *only* knows what kind of trouble I'll get into!" He waved his hands and vanished in a puff of green smoke, from which an anguished wail of "I just hope you're *satisfied*!" drifted and hung in the air.

"It wasn't my fault," muttered Roan, but he was alone in a cold dungeon and no-one was there to hear. There was no justice in the world, he thought. Nobody had been looking out for him on his journey. He could have been killed half a hundred times. He looked down at his missing fingertip and dropped one silent tear.

Then he got up, opened the false bottom to his bag, attracted a jailor and by means of extensive bribery escaped from the palace and the glorious city of Captandum. (The Calyx Emperor was satisfied by the death of a red-harried man in the Square of the Scented Nightingales). By foot, and at night, Roan made his way to the foot of the Rutty Mountains, which he crossed, In Utter Haslet he narrowly avoided being flung once more into the Pit, while at Thelicum he spent an unpleasant couple of weeks in the form of a toad, only being retransformed by an accidental spell during the mage war between Barnsman Thresher and his Oldest son, Seth. His naked flight down the popply road from Thelicum to Pundondor and the indignities he was subjected to in the latter crass city I shall draw a veil over. From Pundondor he travelled (once more by camel) to Rilmeree (losing a fingertip on the way, this time from his left hand) in which city he was beaten up and his last money stolen. Three identical sisters mocked him in the streets. Forced to work his passage back to Melk'arn, he fared no better than on the previous see-voyage - worse, in fact, for great storms arose around the Tur'hian coast, and the sailors adjudging him a bringer of ill-fortune (primarily due to his avoidance of Rhum and his inability to learn the correct way to tap the maggots from his sea-biscuits) tossed him overboard. That the ship was struck immediately after by ball-lightning, killing all on board and breaking the ship up into driftwood (some of which kept Roan's head above the water until

he was picked up by a Vandarian trawler, the sole survivor) did little to cheer him up. He fared slightly better on the trawler, although he was unable ever again to eat fish, and on the morning of this twenty-third birthday -- though he did not know it -- he walked down the gangplank in Melk'arn, his home city, and he came to the house of his father's brother.

All were overjoyed to see him, having given him up as one dead, and also they were amazed: for here was no longer the pallid scholar of bygone days. Here was a sun-bronzed, scarred and worldly-wise man. And Roan sold the books and manuscripts that he had left with his uncle, and with the moneys that he obtained he purchased a small shop in the Pale Quarter, and in this shop he sold amulets. And his affairs prospered, and soon Roan the merchant had three of the shops, and later, ten. And as his affairs flourished and prospered so Roan the merchant became interested in politicking, and he ended his days the Mayor of Melk'arn, his sons and grandsons around his bed, and with great lamentation of servants and womenfolk.

One may assume that there is a moral in there somewhere.

JERUSALEM

will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

—William Blake.

Jerusalem, thought Morris, was like a deep pool, where time had settled too thickly. It had engulfed him, engulfed both of them, and he could feel the pressure of time pushing him up and out. Like swimming down too deep.

He was glad to be out of it.

Tomorrow he would go back to work once more. Work was good. It would give him something to focus on. He turned on the radio and then, mid-song, turned it off.

"I was enjoying that," said Pamela. She was cleaning the fridge, throwing out the wilted lettuce and sour milk from before their holiday and filling it with fresh food.

"I'm sorry." He couldn't think straight, with the music playing. He needed the silence.

Morris closed his eyes and he was back in Jerusalem, feeling the desert heat on his face, staring at the old city and understanding, for the first time, how small it all was. That the real Jerusalem, two thousand years ago, was smaller than an English country town.

Their guide, a lean, leathery woman, pointed. "*Thatís* where the sermon on the mount would have been given. *Thatís* where Jesus was arrested. He was imprisoned *there*. Tried before Pilate *there*, at the far end of the Temple. Crucified on *that* hill." She pointed matter-of-factly down the slopes and up again. It was a few hours' walk at most.

Pamela took photos. She and their guide had hit it off immediately. Morris had not wanted to visit Jerusalem. He had wanted to go to Greece for his holidays, but Pamela had insisted. Jerusalem was *biblical*, she told him. It was part of history.

They walked through the old town, starting in the Jewish quarter.

Stone steps. Closed shops. Cheap souvenirs. A man walked past them wearing a huge black fur hat, and a thick coat. Morris winced. “He must be boiling.”

“It’s what they used to wear in Russia,” said the guide. “They wear it here. The fur hats are for holidays. They carry Russia with them, wherever they go. Of course they are too hot, but they do not know any other way.”

Pamela put a cup of tea down in front of him. “Penny for your thoughts,” she said.

“Remembering the holiday.”

“You don’t want to brood on it,” she said. “Best to let it go. Why don’t you take the dog for a walk?”

He drank the tea. The dog looked at him expectantly when he went to put the lead on it, as if it were about to say something. “Come on boy,” said Morris.

The dog pulled him down the avenue, heading for the Heath. It was green. Jerusalem had been golden: a city of sand and rock. They had walked from the Jewish quarter to the Moslem Quarter, passing bustling shops piled high with sweet things to eat, with fruits and bright clothes. Morris looked at it in wonder.

“Jerusalem Syndrome? Never heard of it,” Pamela was saying. “Have you ever heard of it, Morrie?”

“Sorry, I was miles away,” said Morris. “What does that mean? That door, with all the stencils on it?”

Without glancing round the guide replied, “It’s to welcome someone back from a pilgrimage to Mecca”

“There you go,” said Pamela. “For us, it was going to Jerusalem. Someone’s always going somewhere. Even in the Holy Land, there’s pilgrims. So, you were saying,” she said to the guide. “The wife comes back from a shopping trip and there’s the sheets gone.”

“Exactly,” said the guide. “Happens more often than you’d think. She went to the front desk, and told them she had no idea where the husband was.”

Pamela put her hand around Morris’s arm, as if assuring herself that he was still there. “And where was he?”

“He had Jerusalem Syndrome. They found him on the street corner, wearing nothing but a toga - the sheets. He was preaching –

normally about being good, obeying God. Loving each other."

"Come to Jerusalem and go mad," said Morris. "Not much of an advertising slogan."

Their guide looked at him sternly. "It is," she said, with what Morris thought might actually be pride, "the only location-specific mental illness. And it is the only easily curable mental illness. You know what the cure is?"

"Take away their sheets?"

The guide hesitated. Then she smiled. "Close. You take the person out of Jerusalem. They get better immediately."

"Afternoon," said the duffle-coated man at the end of his road. They'd been nodding to each other for eleven years now. "Bit of a tan. Been on holiday, have we?"

"Jerusalem," said Morris.

"Brrr. Wouldn't catch me going there. Get blown up or kidnapped soon as look at you. See anything interesting?"

Morris hesitated. Then he said, "We went down to an underground, um…." He lost the word. "Water storage place. From Herod's time. They stored the rainwater underground, so it wouldn't evaporate. A hundred years ago you could row a boat through underground Jerusalem."

The lost word hovered at the edge of his consciousness like a hole in a dictionary. Two syllables, begins with a C, means deep echoing underground place where they store water.

"Well, then," said his neighbour.

The Heath was green and it rolled in gentle slopes, interrupted by oak and beech, by chestnut and poplar. He imagined a world in which England was divided, and London was a city crusaded against, lost and won and lost again, over and over.

Perhaps, he thought, *it isnít madness. Perhaps the cracks are just deeper in Jerusalem, or the sky is thin enough that you can hear, when God talks to His prophets. But nobody stops to listen any longer. It's a deep place like a…*

"Cistern," he said, aloud, to nobody.

The green of the heath became dry and golden, in his memory, and the heat was like the opening of an oven door. It was as if he

had never left.

"My feet hurt," Pamela had announced. And then, "I'm going back to the hotel."

Their guide looked concerned.

"I just want to put my feet up for a bit," said Pamela. "It's all so much to take in." The Christ prison shop sold souvenirs and carpets. "I'll bathe my feet. You two carry on without me. Pick me up after lunch."

Morris would have argued, but they had hired the guide for the whole day. Her skin was dark and weathered. She had an extraordinarily white smile, when she smiled. She led him to a café.

"So," said Morris. "Business good?"

"We do not see as many tourists," she said. "Not since the second *Intifada* began."

"Pamela. My wife. She's always wanted to come here. See the holy sights."

"We have so many of them here. Whatever you believe. Christian or Muslim or Jew. It's still the Holy City."

"I suppose you must be looking forward to them sorting all this out," he said. "Er. The Palestinian situation. The politics."

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter to Jerusalem. They come. They believe. Then they kill each other, to prove that God loves them best. Sometimes," she said, "I think it would be best if it was bombed back to a radioactive desert. Then who would want it? But then I think, they would still come here and collect the radioactive dust that might contain atoms of the Dome of the Rock, or of the Temple, or a wall that Christ leaned against on his way to the Cross. People would fight over who owns a poisonous desert, if that desert was Jerusalem."

Morris shifted, uncomfortably.

"You should be glad there is no Jerusalem where you come from. Nobody wants to partition London. Nobody goes on pilgrimages to the holy city of Liverpool. No prophets walked in Birmingham. Your country is too young. It is still green. There is no Holy Madness."

"England's not young."

"They have been fighting about who owns this city for over 3000

years, when King David took it in battle from the Jebusites."

He was drowning in the Time, could feel it crushing him, like an ancient forest being crushed into oil.

She said, "Do you have any children?"

The question took Morris by surprise. "We wanted kids. It didn't work out that way. Too late, now."

"Is she looking for a miracle, your wife? They do, sometimes."

"No. She has ….faith," he said. "I've tried to believe, but I can't. I can't make the jump. Sometimes I think if I could everything would be different. Better, perhaps." He sipped his coffee. "Are you married?"

"I lost my husband."

"Was it a bomb?"

The guide smiled faintly. "An American tourist. From Seattle."

They finished their coffee. "Shall we see how your wife's feet are doing?" she said.

As they walked up the narrow street, towards the hotel, Morris said, "I'm lonely. I work at a job I don't enjoy and come home to a wife who loves me but doesn't much like me, and some days it feels like I can't move and that all I want is for the whole world to go away. And it's all so normal. Every day's the same."

The guide waited in the lobby of the hotel while Morris went up to his room. He was, somehow, not surprised in the least to see that Pamela was not in the bedroom, or in the tiny bathroom, and that the sheets that had been on the bed that morning were now gone.

His dog could have walked the heath forever, but Morris was getting tired and a fine rain was drizzling. They walked back though a green world. *A green and pleasant world,* he thought, knowing that wasn't quite right. His head was like a filing cabinet that had fallen downstairs, and all the information in it was jumbled and disordered.

They had finally caught up with Pamela on the Via Dolo-rosa. She wore a sheet, yes, but she seemed intent, not mad. She was calm, frighteningly so.

"Everything is love," she was telling the people. "Everything is Jerusalem. God is love. Jerusalem is love."

A tourist took a photograph, but the locals ignored her. Morris put his hand on her arm. “Come on love,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

She looked through him. He wondered what she was seeing. She said, “We *are* home. In this place the walls of the world are thin. We can hear Him calling to us, through the walls. Listen. You can hear Him. Listen!”

Pamela did not fight or even protest as they led her back to the hotel. She did not look like a prophet. She looked like a woman in her late forties wearing nothing but a sheet. Morris suspected that their guide was amused, but when he caught her eyes he could see only concern.

They drove from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, and it was on the beach in front of their hotel, after sleeping for almost 24 hours, that Pamela came back, only slightly confused, with little memory of the previous day. He tried to talk to her about what he had seen, about what she had said, but stopped when he saw it was upsetting her. They pretended that it had not happened, did not mention it again.

Sometimes he wondered what it must have felt like inside her head, that day, hearing the voice of God through the golden-coloured stones. But, he told himself, over and over, it was better not to know. Wasn’t it?

He was glad they were back in England, where there was not enough Time to crush you, to suffocate you, to make you dust.

Morris walked the dog back up the avenue in the drizzle, past the trees in the pavement, past the neat front gardens and the fading summer flowers and the perfect green of the lawns, and he felt cold.

He knew she would be gone even before he turned the corner, before he saw the open front door banging in the wind.

He would follow her. And, he knew, almost joyfully, sooner or later, he would find her.

This time he would listen. He would believe, if he could, and if he could not believe he would pretend to himself that he did so hard that it would not matter. Wherever it was that they were going, they would go forward together.

Feminine Endings

My darling,

let us begin this letter, this prelude to an encounter, formally, as a declaration, in the old-fashioned way: I love you. You do not know me (although you have seen me, smiled at me, placed coins in the palm of my hand). I know you (although not so well as I would like. I want to be there when your eyes flutter open in the morning, and you see me, and you smile. Surely this would be paradise enough?). So I do declare myself to you now, with pen set to paper. I declare it again: I love you.

I write this in English, your language, a language I also speak. My English is good. I was for many years ago in England and in Scotland. I spent a whole summer standing in Covent Garden, except for the month of Edinburgh Festival, when I am in Edinburgh. People who put money in my box in Edinburgh included Mr Kevin Spacey the actor, and Mr Jerry Springer the American television star who was in Edinburgh for an Opera about his life.

I have put off writing this for so long, although I have wanted to, although I have composed it many times in my head. Shall I write about you? About me?

First you.

I love your hair, long and red. The first time I saw you I believed you to be a dancer, and I still believe that you have a dancer's body. The legs, and the posture, head up and back. It was your smile that told me you were a foreigner, before ever I heard you speak. In my country we smile in bursts, like the sun coming out and illuminating the fields and then retreating again behind a cloud too soon. Smiles are valuable here. But you smiled all the time, as if everything you saw delighted you. You smiled the first time you saw me, even wider than before. You smiled and I was lost, like a small child in a great forest, never to find its way home again.

I learned when young that the eyes give too much away. Some in my profession adopt dark spectacles, or even (and these I scorn with bitter laughter as amateurs) masks that cover the whole face. What good is a mask? My solution is that of full-sclera theatrical contact lenses, purchased from an American website for a little under 500 Euros, which cover the whole eye. They are dark grey, or course,

and look like stone. They have made me more than $500 Euros, paid for themselves over and over.

You may think, given my profession, that I must be poor, but you would be wrong. Indeed, I fancy that you will be surprised by how much I have collected. My needs have been small and my earnings always very good.

Except when it rains.

Sometimes even when it rains. The others as perhaps you have observed, my love, retreat when it rains, raise umbrellas, run away. I remain where I am. Always. I simply wait, unmoving. It all adds to the conviction of the performance.

And it is a performance, as much as when I was a theatrical actor, a magician's assistant, even a dancer. (That is how I am so familiar with the bodies of dancers.) Always, I was aware of the audience as individuals. I have found this with all actors and all dancers, except the short-sighted ones for whom the audience is a blur. My eyesight is good, even through the contact lenses.

"Did you see the man with the moustache in the third row?" we would say. "He is staring at Minou with lustful glances."

And Minou would reply, "Ah yes. But the woman on the aisle, who looks like the German Chancellor, she is now fighting to stay awake." If one person falls asleep, you can lose the whole audience, so we play the rest of the evening to a middle-aged woman who wishes only to succumb to drowsiness.

The second time you stood near me you were so close I could smell your shampoo. It smelled like flowers and fruit. I imagine America as being a whole continent full of women who smell of flowers and fruit. You were talking to a young man from the university. You were complaining about the difficulties of our language for an American. "I understand what gives a man or a woman gender," you were saying. "But what makes a chair masculine or a pigeon feminine? Why should a statue have a feminine ending?"

The young man laughed and pointed straight at me, then. But truly, if you are walking through the square, you can tell nothing about me. The robes look like old marble, water-stained and time-worn and lichened. The skin could be granite. Until I move I am stone and old bronze, and I do not move if I do not want to. I

simply stand.

Some people wait in the square for much too long, even in the rain, to see what I will do. They are uncomfortable not knowing, only happy once they have assured themselves that I am natural, not artificial. It is the uncertainty that traps people, like a mouse in a glue-trap.

I am writing about myself too much. I know that this is a letter of introduction as much as it is a love letter. But I should write about you. Your smile. Your eyes so green. (You do not know the true colour of my eyes. I will tell you. They are brown.) You like classical music, but you have also Abba and Kid Loco on your iPod Nano. You wear no perfume. Your underwear is, for the most part, faded and comfortable, although you have a single set of red-lace bra and panties which you wear for special occasions.

People watch me in the square, but the eye is only attracted by motion. I have perfected the tiny movement, so tiny that the passer can scarcely tell if it is something he saw or not. Yes? Too often people will not see what does not move. The eyes see it but do not see it, they discount it. I am human-shaped, but I am not human. So in order to make them see me, to make them look at me, to stop their eyes from sliding off me and paying me no attention, I am forced to make the tiniest motions, to draw their eyes to me. Then, and only then, do they see me. But they do not always know what they have seen.

I see you as a code to be broken, or as a puzzle to be cracked. Or a jig-saw puzzle, to be put together. I walk through your life, and I stand motionless at the edge of my own life. My own gestures, statuesque, precise, are too often misinterpreted. I love you. I do not doubt this.

You have a younger sister. She has a myspace account, and a facebook account. We talk sometimes. All too often people assume that a medieval statue exists only in the fifteenth century. This is not so true: I have a room, I have a laptop. My computer is passworded. I practice safe computing. Your password is your first name. That is not safe. Anyone could read your email, look at your photographs, reconstruct your interests from your web history. Someone who was interested and who cared could spend endless hours building up a complex schematic of your life, matching the people in the photographs to the names in the emails, for example.

It would not be hard reconstructing a life from a computer, or from cellphone messages, like a crossword puzzle.

I remember when I actually admitted to myself that you had taken to watching me, and only me, on your way across the square. You paused. You admired me. You saw me move once, for a child, and you told a friend, loud enough to be heard, that I might be a real statue. I take it as the highest compliment. I have many different styles of movement, of course – I can move like clockwork, in a set of tiny jerks and stutters, I can move like a robot or an automaton. I can move like a statue coming to life after hundreds of years of being stone.

Within my hearing you have spoken of the beauty of this small city. How standing inside the stained-glass confection of the old church was like being imprisoned inside a kaleidoscope of jewels. It was like being in the heart of the sun. You are concerned about your mother's illness.

When you were an undergraduate you worked as a cook, and your fingertips are covered with the scar-marks of a thousand tiny knife-cuts.

I love you, and it is my love for you that drives me to know all about you. The more I know the closer I am to you. You were to come to my country with a young man, but he broke your heart, and you came here to spite him, and still you smiled. I close my eyes and I can see you smiling. I close my eyes and I see you striding across the town square in a clatter of pigeons. The women of this country do not stride. They move diffidently, unless they are dancers. And when you sleep your eyelashes flutter. The way your cheek touches the pillow. The way you dream.

I dream of dragons. When I was a small child, at the home, they told me that there was a dragon beneath the old city. I pictured the dragon wreathing like black smoke beneath the buildings, inhabiting the cracks between the cellars, insubstantial and yet always present. That is how I think of the dragon, and how I think of the past, now. A black dragon made of smoke. When I perform I have been eaten by the dragon and have become part of the past. I am, truly, seven hundred years old. Kings may come and kings may go. Armies arrive and are absorbed or return home again, leaving only damage and bastard children behind them, but the statues remain, and the dragon of smoke, and the past.

I say this, although the statue that I emulate is not from this town at all. It stands in front of a church in southern Italy, where it is believed either to represent the sister of John the Baptist, or a local lord who endowed the church to celebrate not dying of the plague, or the angel of death.

I had imagined you perfectly chaste, my love, yet one time the red lace panties were pushed to the bottom of your laundry hamper, and upon close examination I was able to assure myself that you had, unquestionably, been unchaste the previous evening. Only you know who with, for you did not talk of the incident in your letters home, or allude to it in your online Journal.

A small girl looked up at me once, and turned to her mother, and said "Why is she so unhappy?" (I translate into English for you, obviously. The girl was referring to me as a statue and thus she used the feminine ending.)

"Why do you believe her to be unhappy?"

"Why else would people make themselves into statues?"

Her mother smiled. "Perhaps she is unhappy in love," she said.

I was not unhappy in love. I was prepared to wait until everything was ready, something very different.

There is time. There is always time. It is the gift I took from being a statue. One of the gifts, I should say.

You have walked past me and looked at me and smiled, and you have walked past me and barely noticed me as anything other than an object. Truly, it is remarkable how little regard you, or any human, gives to something that remains completely motionless. You have woken in the night, got up, walked to the little toilet, peed and walked back to bed. You would not notice something perfectly still, would you? Something in the shadows?

If I could I would have made the paper for this letter for you out of my body. I thought about mixing in with the ink my blood or spittle, but no. There is such a thing as overstatement. Yet great loves demand grand gestures, yes? I am unused to grand gestures. I am more practised in the tiny gestures. I made a small boy scream once, simply by smiling at him when he had convinced himself that I was made of marble. It is the smallest gestures that will never be forgotten.

I love you.

Soon, I hope, you will know this for yourself. And then we will never part. It will be time, in a moment, to turn around, put down the letter. I am with you, even now, in these old apartments with the Iranian carpets on the walls.

You have walked past me too many times.

No more.

I am here with you. I am here now.

When you put down this letter. When you turn and look across this old room, your eyes sweeping it with relief or with joy or even with terror…..

Then I will move. Move, just a fraction. And, finally, you will see me.

ORANGE

(Third Subject's Responses to Investigator's Written Questionnaire).

EYES ONLY

1) Jemima Glorfindel Petula Ramsey.

2) 17 on June the 9th.

3) The last 5 years. Before that we lived in Glasgow (Scotland). Before that, Cardiff (Wales).

4) I don't know. I think he's in magazine publishing now. He doesn't talk to us any more. The divorce was pretty bad and mum wound up paying him a lot of money. Which seems sort of wrong to me. But maybe it was worth it just to get shot of him.

5) An inventor and entrepreneur. She invented the Stuffed Muffin™, and started the Stuffed Muffin chain. I used to like them when I was a kid, but you can get kind of sick of stuffed muffins for every meal, especially because mum used us as guinea pigs. The Complete Turkey Dinner Christmas Stuffed Muffin was the worst. But she sold out her interest in the Stuffed Muffin chain about five years ago, to start work on My Mum's Coloured Bubbles (not actually TM yet).

6) Two. My sister Nerys, who was just 15, and my brother Pryderi, 12.

7) Several times a day.

8) No.

9) Through the internet. Probably on eBay.

10) She's been buying colours and dyes from all over the world ever since she decided that the world was crying out for brightly coloured dayglo bubbles. The kind you can blow, with bubble

mixture.

11) It's not really a laboratory. I mean, she calls it that, but really it's just the garage. Only she took some of the Stuffed Muffins (TM) money and converted it, so it has sinks and bathtubs and bunsen burners and things, and tiles on the walls and the floor to make it easier to clean.

12) I don't know. Nerys used to be pretty normal. When she turned 13 she started reading these magazines and putting pictures of these strange bimbo women up on her wall like Britney Spears and so on. Sorry if anyone reading this is a Britney fan;) but I just don't get it. The whole orange thing didn't start until last year.

13) Artificial tanning creams. You couldn't go near her for hours after she put it on. And she'd never give it time to dry after she smeared it on her skin, so it would come off on her sheets and on the fridge door and in the shower leaving smears of orange everywhere. Her friends would wear it too, but they never put it on like she did. I mean, she'd slather on the cream, with no attempt to look even human-coloured, and she thought she looked great. She did the tanning salon thing once, but I don't think she liked it, because she never went back.

14) Tangerine Girl. The Oompaloompa. Carrot-top. Go-Mango. Orangina.

15) Not very well. But she didn't seem to care, really. I mean, this is a girl who said that she couldn't see the point of science or maths because she was going to be a pole dancer as soon as she left school. I said, nobody's going to pay to see you in the altogether, and she said how do you know? and I told her that I saw the little quicktime films she'd made of herself dancing nuddy and left in the camera and she screamed and said give me that, and I told her I'd wiped them. But honestly, I don't think she was ever going to be the next Bettie Page or whoever. She's a sort of squarish shape, for a start.

16) German measles, mumps and I think Pryderi had chicken pox when he was staying in Melbourne with the Grandparents.

17) In a small pot. It looked a bit like a jam jar, I suppose.

18) I don't think so. Nothing that looked like a warning label anyway. But there was a return address. It came from abroad, and the return address was in some kind of foreign lettering.

19) You have to understand that mum had been buying colours and dyes from all over the world for five years. The thing with the dayglo bubbles is not that someone can blow glowing coloured bubbles, it's that they don't pop and leave splashes of dye all over everything. Mum says that would be a law suit waiting to happen. So, no.

20) There was some kind of shouting match between Nerys and mum to begin with, because mum had come back from the shops and not bought anything from Nerys's shopping list except the shampoo. Mum said she couldn't find the tanning cream at the supermarket but I think she just forgot. So Nerys stormed off and slammed the door and went into her bedroom and played something that was probably Britney Spears really loudly. I was out the back, feeding the three cats, the chinchilla, and a guinea pig named Roland who looks like a hairy cushion, and I missed it all.

21) On the kitchen table.

22) When I found the empty jam-jar in the back garden the next morning. It was underneath Nerys's window. It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure it out.

23) Honestly, I couldn't be bothered. I figured it would just be more yelling, you know? And mum would work it out soon enough.

24) Yes, it was stupid. But it wasn't uniquely stupid, if you see what I mean. Which is to say, it was par-for-the-course-for-Nerys stupid.

25) That she was glowing.

26) A sort of pulsating orange.

27) When she started telling us that she was going to be worshipped like a god, as she was in the dawn times.

28) Pryderi said she was floating about an inch above the ground. But I didn't actually see this. I thought he was just playing along with her newfound weirdness.

29) She didn't answer to "Nerys" any more. She described herself mostly as either My Immanence, or The Vehicle. ("It is time to feed the Vehicle.")

30) Dark chocolate. Which was weird because in the old days I was the only one in the house who even sort-of liked it. But Pryderi had to go out and buy her bars and bars of it.

31) No. Mum and me just thought it was more Nerys. Just a bit more imaginatively weirdo Nerys than usual.

32) That night, when it started to get dark. You could see the orange pulsing under the door. Like a glow-worm or something. Or a light show. The weirdest thing was that I could still see it with my eyes closed.

33) The next morning. All of us.

34) It was pretty obvious by this point. She didn't really even look like Nerys any longer. She looked sort of *smudged*. Like an after-image. I thought about it, and it's… Okay. Suppose you were staring at something really bright, that was a blue colour. Then you closed your eyes, and you'd see this glowing yellowy-orange after-image in your eyes? That was what she looked like.

35) They didn't work either.

36) She let Pryderi leave to get her more chocolate. Mum and I weren't allowed to leave the house any more.

37) Mostly I just sat in the back garden and read a book. There wasn't very much else I really could do. I started wearing dark glasses, so did mum, because the orange light hurt our eyes. Other than that, nothing.

38) Only when we tried to leave or call anybody. There was food in the house, though. And Stuffed Muffins (TM) in the freezer.

39) “If you’d just stopped her wearing that stupid tanning cream a year ago we wouldn’t be in this mess!” But it was unfair, and I apologised afterwards.

40) When Pryderi came back with the dark chocolate bars. He said he’d gone up to a traffic warden and told him that his sister had turned into a giant orange glow and was controlling our minds. He said the man was extremely rude to him.

41) I don’t have a boyfriend. I did, but we broke up after he went to a Rolling Stones concert with the evil bottle-blonde former friend whose name I do not mention. Also, I mean, the Rolling Stones? These little old goat-men hopping around the stage pretending to be all rock and roll? Please. So, no.

42) I’d quite like to be a vet. But then I think about having to put animals down, and I don’t know. I want to travel for a bit before I make any decisions.

43) The garden hose. We turned it on full, while she was eating her chocolate bars, and distracted, and we sprayed it at her.

44) Just orange steam, really. Mum said that she had solvents and things in the laboratory, if we could get in there, but by now Her Immanence was hissing mad (literally) and she sort of fixed us to the floor. I can’t explain it. I mean, I wasn’t stuck, but I couldn’t leave or move my legs. I was just where she left me.

45) About half a metre above the carpet. She’d sink down a bit to go through doors, so she didn’t bump her head. And after the hose incident she didn’t go back to her room, just stayed in the main room and floated about grumpily, the colour of a luminous carrot.

46) Complete world domination.

47) I wrote it down on a piece of paper and gave it to Pryderi.

48) He had to carry it back. I don’t think Her Immanence really understood money.

49) I don’t know. It was mum’s idea more than mine. I think she hoped that the solvent might remove the orange. And at that point,

it couldn't hurt. Nothing could have made things worse.

50) It didn't even upset her, like the hose-water did. I'm pretty sure she liked it. I think I saw her dipping her chocolate bars into it, before she ate them, although I had to sort of squint up my eyes to see anything where she was. It was all a sort of great orange glow.

51) That we were all going to die. Mum told Pryderi that if the Great Oompaloompa let him out to buy chocolate again, he just shouldn't bother coming back. And I was getting really upset about the animals—I hadn't fed the chinchilla or Roland the guinea pig for two days, because I couldn't go into the back garden. I couldn't go anywhere. Except the loo, and then I had to ask.

52) I suppose because they thought the house was on fire. All the orange light. I mean, it was a natural mistake.

53) We were glad she hadn't done that to us. Mum said it proved that Nerys was still in there somewhere, because if she had the power to turn us into goo, like she did the fire-fighters, she would have done. I said that maybe she just wasn't powerful enough to turn us into goo at the beginning and now she couldn't be bothered.

54) You couldn't even see a person in there any more. It was a bright orange pulsing light, and sometimes it talked straight into your head.

55) When the spaceship landed.

56) I don't know. I mean, it was bigger than the whole block, but it didn't crush anything. It sort of materialised around us, so that our whole house was inside it. And the whole street was inside it too.

57) No. But what else could it have been?

58) A sort of pale blue. They didn't pulse, either. They twinkled.

59) More than six, less than twenty. It's not that easy to tell if this is the same intelligent blue light you were just speaking to five minutes ago.

60) Three things. First of all, a promise that Nerys wouldn't be hurt or harmed. Second, that if they were ever able to return her to the way she was, they'd let us know, and bring her back. Thirdly, a recipe for fluorescent bubble mixture. (I can only assume they were reading mum's mind, because she didn't say anything. It's possible that Her Immanence told them, though. She definitely had access to some of "the vehicle's" memories.) Also, they gave Pryderi a thing like a glass skateboard.

61) A sort of a liquid sound. Then everything became transparent. I was crying, and so was Mum. And Pryderi said "Cool beans," and I started to giggle while crying, and then it was just our house again.

62) We went out into the back garden and looked up. There was something blinking blue and orange, very high, getting smaller and smaller, and we watched it until it was out of sight.

63) Because I didn't want to.

64) I fed the remaining animals. Roland was in a state. The cats just seemed happy that someone was feeding them again. I don't know how the chinchilla got out.

65) Sometimes. I mean, you have to bear in mind that she was the single most irritating person on the planet, even before the whole Her Immanence thing. But yes, I guess so. If I'm honest.

66) Sitting outside at night, staring up at the sky, wondering what she's doing now.

67) He wants his glass skateboard back. He says that it's his, and the government has no right to keep it. (You are the government, aren't you?) Mum seems happy to share the patent for the Coloured Bubble recipe with the government though. The man said that it might be the basis of a whole new branch of molecular something or other. Nobody gave me anything, so I don't have to worry.

68) Once, in the back garden, looking up at the night sky. I think it was only an orangeyish star, actually. It could have been Mars, I know they call it the red planet. Although once in a while I think that maybe she's back to herself again, and dancing, up there,

wherever she is, and all the aliens love her pole dancing because they just don't know any better, and they think it's a whole new art-form, and they don't even mind that she's sort of square.

69) I don't know. Sitting in the back garden talking to the cats, maybe. Or blowing silly-coloured bubbles.

70) Until the day that I die.

I attest that this is a true statement of events.

Signed:

Date:

ORPHEE (for Kathy Acker)

Orpheus was a musician. He made songs. He knew mysteries. One day the panther girls high on wine and lust came past and tore him flesh from flesh. His head still sang and prophesied as it floated down to the sea.

(Do not look back. Do not look fucking back. Do not look back.)

There was a girl, and he said she was his girl. He followed her to Hell when she died. You could do that when your girlfriend dies: there are entrances to Hell in every major city: so many doors, who has time to look behind each one?

When Orpheus was young he got the girl back from Hell safely. That's where the years came from. Euridice comes home from Hell and the flowers bloom and the world puddles and quickens, and it's Spring.

But that was never good enough.

And before that Spring story, it was a life and death tale. We got a million of them. If he hadn't looked back, if he just hadn't looked back, then all the people would come back from the dead all the time, each of us, no more ghosts, no more darkness.

I would go to Hell to see you once more. There's a door on the third floor of the New York Public Library, on the way to the men's toilets, by the little Charles Addams gallery. It's never locked. You just have to open it. I would go to Hell for you. I would tell them stories that are not false and that are not true. I would tell them stories until they wept salt tears and gave you back to me and to the world.

It doesn't have to be a year. I'd take a day. I'd take an hour. I'd walk in front of you to the light.

But I'd look back, wouldn't I? We all would. The ones who can't look back, who can only stare into the sunrise ahead of them, stare into the glorious future, those people don't get to visit Hell.

So Orpheus came back and carried on, because he had to, and he made magic and sang songs. He taught that there was only truth in dreams. That was one of the mysteries: in dreams the veil was lifted

and you could see so far forward you might as well have been looking back.

Some die in Washington DC or in London or in Mexico. They do not look forward to their deaths. They glance aside, or down, or they look back. Every hour wounds. That was what she told me. Every hour wounds, the last one kills.

And looking back now, she's standing naked in the moonlight. Her breast is already blackening, her body a feast of tiny wounds. Izanagi followed his wife to the shadow lands, but he looked back: he saw her face, her dead face, and he fled.

I dreamed today of bone-white horses, stamping and nuzzling in the bright sunshine, and of orange poppies which swayed and danced in the spring wind.

(Do not look back.)

She had the softest lips, he said. He said, she had the softest lips of all. And her head still sang and prophesied as it floated down to the sea.

(Written as the liner notes for Projekt's Orpheus CD.)

GHOSTS IN THE MACHINES

We are gathered here at the final end of what Bradbury called the October Country: a state of mind as much as it is a time. All the harvests are in, the frost is on the ground, there's mist in the crisp night air and it's time to tell ghost stories.

When I was growing up in England, Halloween was no time for celebration. It was the night when, we were assured, the dead walked, when all the things of night were loosed, and, sensibly, believing this, we children stayed at home, closed our windows, barred our doors, listened to the twigs rake and patter at the window-glass, shivered, and were content.

There were days that changed everything: birthdays and New Years and First Days of School, days that showed us that there was an order to all things, and the creatures of the night and the imagination understood this, just as we did. All Hallows' Eve was their party, the night all their birthdays came at once. They had license—all the boundaries set between the living and the dead were breached—and there were witches, too, I decided, for I had never managed to be scared of ghosts, but witches, I knew, waited in the shadows, and they ate small boys.

I did not believe in witches, not in the daylight. Not really even at midnight. But on Halloween I believed in everything. I even believed that there was a country across the ocean where, on that night, people my age went from door to door in costumes, begging for sweets, threatening tricks.

Halloween was a secret, back then, something private, and I would hug myself inside on Halloween, as a boy, most gloriously afraid.

•

Now I write fictions, and sometimes those stories stray into the shadows, and then I find I have to explain myself to my loved ones and my friends.

Why do you write ghost stories? Is there any place for ghost stories in the 21st century?

As Alice said, there's plenty of room. Technology does nothing to

dispel the shadows at the edge of things. The ghost-story world still hovers at the limits of vision, making things stranger, darker, more magical, just as it always has ….

There's a blog I don't think anyone else reads. I ran across it searching for something else, and something about it, the tone of voice perhaps, so flat and bleak and hopeless, caught my attention. I bookmarked it.

If the girl who kept it knew that anyone was reading it, anybody cared, perhaps she would not have taken her own life. She even wrote about what she was going to do, the pills, the Nembutal and Seconal and the rest, that she had stolen a few at a time over the months from her stepfather's bathroom, the plastic bag, the loneliness, and wrote about it in a flat, pragmatic way, explaining that while she knew that suicide attempts were cries for help, this really wasn't, she just didn't want to live any longer.

She counted down to the big day, and I kept reading, uncertain what to do, if anything. There was not enough identifying information on the Web page even to tell me which continent she lived on. No e-mail address. No way to leave comments. The last message said simply, "Tonight."

I wondered whom I should tell, if anyone, and then I shrugged, and, best as I could, I swallowed the feeling that I had let the world down.

And then she started to post again. She says she's cold and she's lonely.

I think she knows I'm still reading ….

•

I remember the first time I found myself in New York for Halloween. The parade went past, and went past and went past, all witches and ghouls and demons and wicked queens and glorious, and I was, for a moment, 7 years old once more, and profoundly shocked. If you did this in England, I found myself thinking in the part of my head that makes stories, things would wake, all the things we burn our bonfires on Guy Fawkes' to keep away. Perhaps they can do it here, because the things that watch are not English. Perhaps the dead do not walk here, on Halloween.

Then, a few years later, I moved to America and bought a house

that looked as if it had been drawn by Charles Addams on a day he was feeling particularly morbid. For Halloween, I learned to carve pumpkins, then I stocked up on candies and waited for the first trick-or-treaters to arrive. Fourteen years later, I'm still waiting. Perhaps my house looks just a little too unsettling; perhaps it's simply too far out of town.

•

And then there was the one who said, in her cellphone's voicemail message, sounding amused as she said it, that she was afraid she had been murdered, but to leave a message and she would get back to us.

It wasn't until we read the news, several days later, that we learned that she had indeed been murdered, apparently randomly and quite horribly.

But then she did get back to each of the people who had left her a message. By phone, at first, leaving cellphone messages that sounded like someone whispering in a gale, muffled wet sounds that never quite resolved into words.

Eventually, of course, she will return our calls in person.

•

And still they ask, Why tell ghost stories? Why read them or listen to them? Why take such pleasure in tales that have no purpose but, comfortably, to scare?

I don't know. Not really. It goes way back. We have ghost stories from ancient Egypt, after all, ghost stories in the Bible, classical ghost stories from Rome (along with werewolves, cases of demonic possession and, of course, over and over, witches). We have been telling each other tales of otherness, of life beyond the grave, for a long time; stories that prickle the flesh and make the shadows deeper and, most important, remind us that we live, and that there is something special, something unique and remarkable about the state of being alive.

Fear is a wonderful thing, in small doses. You ride the ghost train into the darkness, knowing that eventually the doors will open and you will step out into the daylight once again. It's always reassuring

to know that you're still here, still safe. That nothing strange has happened, not really. It's good to be a child again, for a little while, and to fear—not governments, not regulations, not infidelities or accountants or distant wars, but ghosts and such things that don't exist, and even if they do, can do nothing to hurt us.

And this time of year is best for a haunting, as even the most prosaic things cast the most disquieting shadows.

The things that haunt us can be tiny things: a Web page; a voicemail message; an article in a newspaper, perhaps, by an English writer, remembering Halloweens long gone and skeletal trees and winding lanes and darkness. An article containing fragments of ghost stories, and which, nonsensical although the idea has to be, nobody ever remembers reading but you, and which simply isn't there the next time you go and look for it.

THE ANNOTATED BROTHERS GRIMM:
GRIMMER THAN YOU THOUGHT

ACOB and Wilhelm Grimm did not set out to entertain children, not at first. They were primarily collectors and philologists, who almost two centuries ago assembled German fairy tales as part of a life's work that included, Maria Tatar points out: "massive volumes with such titles as 'German Legends,' 'German Grammar,' 'Ancient German Law' and 'German Heroic Legends.' (Jacob Grimm's 'German Grammar' alone,'' we are told helpfully, "took up 3,854 pages.'') They published their first collection of *Märchen,* "Children's Stories and Household Tales,'' in 1812, with a second volume in 1815 and an expanded and revised edition in 1819; folklorists who became, of necessity, storytellers, they reworked the tales for years, smoothing them while removing material they considered unsuitable for children.

The Grimms' fairy tales are inescapably, well, grimmer than the courtly, sparkling 17th-century ''Cinderella'' and *Tales of Mother Goose* of Charles Perrault. The Brothers Grimm toned down bawdier content—in their first edition, Rapunzel's question to the enchantress was why, after the Prince's visits, her belly had begun to swell—but not much of the violence and bloodshed. Occasionally they were even heightened. "The Juniper Tree'' is a treatment of death and rebirth, just deserts and restoration, that feels almost sacred, but the child murder and cannibalism make it untellable today as children's fiction.

The Annotated Brothers Grimm gives us a sample of the 210 tales in the authoritative version of the seventh and final edition of 1857. Tatar, dean of humanities and professor of Germanic languages and literature at Harvard University, has newly translated 37 of the 210, as well as nine tales for adults, and annotated them, drawing on the commentary of the Grimms themselves and of writers who have reused the Grimms' material, from Jane Yolen and Peter Straub to Terry Pratchett.

Annotating fairy tales must be different in kind from the task of annotating, say, a Sherlock Holmes story or Lewis Carroll's "Hunting of the Snark.'' Sherlock Holmes stories don't have a

multiplicity of variants from different cultures and times; *Red Riding Hood* exists in versions in which, before she clambers into bed with the wolf, she first eats her grandmother's flesh and drinks her blood; in which she strips for the wolf; in which, naked, she excuses herself to use the privy and escapes; in which she is first devoured, then cut from the wolf's stomach by a huntsman; in which….

Tatar's book, with its annotations, explanations, front matter and end matter, illustrations and biographical essay and further-reading section, is difficult to overpraise. A volume for parents, for scholars, for readers, it never overloads the stories or, worse, reduces them to curiosities. And as an object, it's a chocolate-box feast of multicolored inks and design.

The annotations are fascinating. Tatar points out things so plain that commentators sometimes miss them (for example, that "Hansel and Gretel" is a tale driven by food and hunger from a time when, for the peasantry, eating until you were full was a pipe dream). In the introduction to "Snow White," we learn that "the Grimms, in an effort to preserve the sanctity of motherhood, were forever turning biological mothers into stepmothers," while an annotation tells us that in the 1810 manuscript version "there is only one queen, and she is both biological mother and persecutor."

Only rarely does Tatar note the blindingly obvious. When the heroine of "The Singing Soaring Lark" (the Grimms' "Beauty and the Beast") sits down and cries, we're told that characters often cry when things are going badly: "The weeping is emblematic of the grief and sadness they feel, and it gives the character an opportunity to pause before moving on to a new phase of action." Well, quite.

The assemblage of stories—Germanic tales that have become part of world culture—parades an array of nameless youngest sons and intelligent and noble girls. As both A. S. Byatt (who wrote the introduction) and Tatar point out, the heroes and heroines triumph not because they have good hearts or are purer or nobler than others (indeed, most of the young men are foolish, and some are downright lazy) but because they are the central characters, and the story will take care of them, as stories do.

The "adult" section contains several murderous cautionary tales, along with the nightmare of "The Jew in the Brambles," a story not much reprinted since 1945, in which the hero tortures a Jewish

peddler using a magic fiddle, making him dance in brambles; at the end the peddler is hanged. Three of the Grimms' tales contain Jewish figures; "the two that feature anti-Semitism in its most virulent form were included in the Compact Edition designed for young readers" (1825), Tatar tells us. "The Jew in the Brambles" casts a long shadow back through the book, leaving one wondering whether the ashes Cinderella slept in would one day become the ashes of Auschwitz.

And yet most of the stories, no matter how murderous, exude comfort. Rereading them feels like coming home. Tatar's translation is comfortable and familiar (the occasional verse translations are slightly less felicitous); several times I found myself reading right through an unfamiliar or forgotten tale to find out what happened next, ignoring the annotations completely.

Illustrations are an important ingredient of fairy tales. The variety and choice here are beyond reproach: among them, Arthur Rackham, with his polled trees that gesture and bend like old men and his adults all gnarled and twisted like trees; the elegance of Kay Nielsen; the lush draperies and delicate fancies of Warwick Goble.

The Annotated Brothers Grimm treats the stories as something important -- not, in the end, because of what they tell us of the buried roots of Germanic myth, or because of the often contradictory and intermittently fashionable psychoanalytic interpretations, or for any other reason than that they are part of the way we see the world, because they should be told. That's what I took from it, anyway. But fairy tales are magic mirrors: they show you what you wish to see.

THE VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

There were authors grumbling about not going to the Oscars. I heard about it from friends. “So why are you going?” they asked.

I had written a book called *Coraline*, which director Henry Selick had transformed into a stopmotion wonderland. I’d helped Henry as much as I could through the process of turning something from a book into a film. I had endorsed the film, encouraged people to see it, mugged with buttons on an internet trailer. I had also written a 15 second sequence for the Oscars, in which Coraline told an interviewer what winning an Oscar would do for her. I’d assumed that this would get me into the Oscars. It didn’t. But Henry, as director, had tickets, and could decide where they would go, and one of them went to me.

My father had died on March the 7th 2009. The Oscars are March 7th 2010. I expect that it would just be another day, and it will not bother me at all, demonstrating that I do not know myself very well, because when the day arrives I am melancholy, and do not want to go to the Oscars. I want to be at home, walking in the woods with my dog, and if I could simply press a button and be there without disappointing anybody, I would.

I get dressed. A designer named Kambriel, whom I met when she had made a dress that would allow my fiancée and Jason Webley to represent conjoined twins, had offered to dress me for the Oscars, and I took her up on it. She made me a jacket and a waistcoat, and I fancy that I look pretty good in them. Best of all, I now have an answer to the people who ask “What are you wearing to the Oscars?” And it makes Kambriel amazingly happy.

Focus Films who distributed *Coraline*, are looking after me. The previous night they had a small reception at the Chateau Marmont for their two Oscar Nominees, *Coraline* and *A Serious Man*. The partygoers were a strange mash-up of Minneapolis Jews and animators. Even more oddly, I was one of the Minneapolis Jews (or almost. I wound up comparing notes with one of the other partygoers on the St Paul paper’s pulse-pounding exposé that I actually live an hour away from Minneapolis).

The best thing about the Oscars, I realised when the nominees were announced, is that *Coraline* won’t win. In the year that *Up* is

nominated for Best Picture, which obviously, it won't win, nothing but *Up* can win best Animated Picture.

A limo picks me up at 3:00pm and we drive to the Oscars. It's a slow drive: streets are closed off. The last civilians we see are standing on a street corner holding placards telling me that God Hates Fags, that the recent Earthquakes are God's Special Way of Hating Fags, and that the Jews Stole something, but I can't see what, as another placard is in the way.

A block before we reach the Kodak Theater the car is searched, and then we're there and I'm tipped out onto the Red Carpet. Someone pushes a ticket into my hand, to get the car back later that night.

It's controlled chaos.

I am standing blankly, realising I have no idea what to do now, but the women look like butterflies, and there are people in the bleachers who shout as each limo draws up. Someone says "Neil?"

It's Deette, from *Focus*. "I just came back from walking Henry through. What a nice coincidence. Would you like me to take you through?"

I would like that very much. She asks if I would like to walk past the cameras, and I say that I would, because my fiancée is in Australia and my daughters are watching on TV, and Kambriel will be happy to see her jacket on television.

We head down into the throng, behind someone in a beautiful dress. It looks like a watercolour of a dream. I have no idea who anyone is, except for Steve Carrell, because he looks just like Steve Carrell on television, except a tiny bit less orange.

We are scrunched together tightly as we go through metal detectors, and the beautiful watercolour dress is trodden on, and the lady wearing it is very gracious about this.

I ask Deette who's inside the dress, and she tells me it's Rachel McAdams. I want to say Hello—Rachel's said nice things about me in interviews—but she's working right now. I'm not. No-one wants to take my photo, or, Deette discovers, to interview me. I'm invisible.

At the bend in the red carpet we pause. I look down at Rachel McAdams' watercolour dress and wonder if I can see a footprint.

Cameras flash, but not at me.

And we're into the Kodak Theatre. Someone else introduces me to the editor of *Variety*. I realise my facial recognition skills do not work when people are in tuxedos. (Except for James Cameron, whom I have now only ever seen in a tuxedo and would not recognise wearing anything else.) I tell this to the editor of *Variety*. He points to a man with a tan and a huge grin, tells me it's the Mayor of Los Angeles. "He comes to all these things," he says. "Why isn't he behind his desk, working?"

"Er. Because this is the biggest day in Hollywood's year?" I venture. "And it's Sunday?"

"Well. Yes. But he still comes out for the opening of a drinks cabinet."

I went to the Golden Globes six weeks earlier and discovered that the commercial breaks in award shows are spent in a strange form of en masse Hollywood speed-dating as people shuttle around the room trying to find friends or make deals, and assume that tonight will be much the same.

The Kodak theatre has a ground floor and, above that, three mezzanines. My ticket is for the first mezzanine. I head, sheep-like, up the stairs. There is a crush to get in, as a disembodied voice tells us urgently that the Academy Awards will start in five minutes. I stare at the woman in front of me. She has blonde hair and a face that's strangely fish-like, a scary-sweet plastic surgery face. She has old hands and a small, wrinkled, husband who looks much older than her. I wonder if they started out the same age.

And we're in, with no time to spare. The lights go down and Neil Patrick Harris sings a special Oscars song. It does not seem to have a tune. Several people on Twitter who aren't sure which Neil is which congratulate me on it.

And now our hosts: Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin. They come out, they make jokes. From the first mezzanine, the timing is off, the jokes are awkward, the delivery is wooden. But it doesn't feel as if they're playing to us. I wonder if it works on television, and send the question out on Twitter. A few hundred people tell me it's just as bad on TV, twenty tell me they're enjoying it. I decide this is what Twitter is for: keeping you company when you're all alone on the mezzanine.

Best Animated movie is the second category of the night. My 15 seconds of Coraline talking to the camera goes by fast. There, I think. The largest audience that my words will ever have.

Up wins.

The Oscars continue. In the audience, we cannot see what they are seeing on television at home. Somewhere below me George Clooney is grimacing at the camera, but I do not know.

Tina Fey and Robert Downey Jr present the best screenplay award, and are funny. I wonder if they wrote their own bit.

During the commercials the lights go down and they play music to mingle by. Roxanne does not want to put on the red light.

I head for the first mezzanine bar. I'm hungry and want to kill some time. I drink whisky. I order a chocolate brownie which turns out to be about as big as my head and the sweetest thing I've ever put in my mouth. I share it.

People are wandering up and down the stairs.

Whisky and sugar careening through my system, I defy the orders on my ticket not to photograph anything, and I twitter a picture of the bar menu. My fiancée is sending me messages on Twitter urging me to photograph the inside of the women's toilet, something she did during the Golden Globes, but even in my sugar-addled state this seems a potentially disastrous idea. Still, I think, I should head downstairs and, in the next commercial break, say hello to Henry Selick. I walk over to the stairs. A nice young man in a suit asks me for my ticket. I show it to him. He explains that, as a resident of the first mezzanine, I am not permitted to walk downstairs and potentially bother the A-List.

I am outraged.

I am not actually outraged, but I am a bit bored and have friends downstairs.

I decide that I will persuade the inhabitants of the mezzanines to rise up as one and to storm the stairs, like in Titanic. They might shoot a few of us, I decide, but they cannot stop us all. We can be free; we can drink in the downstairs bar; we can mingle with Harvey Weinstein.

Someone tells me on Twitter that nobody's checking the elevators. I suspect that this might be a trap, and head back to my

seat.

I have missed the tribute to Horror Movies.

Rachel McAdams presents an award in her beautiful, oh-so-treadonable dress.

For the Best Actor and Actress awards, a tableau of people who have worked with the nominees tell us how wonderful they are. I wonder if this works on television. On the stage in front of us it is painfully clumsy.

People below us are milling and chatting and schmoozing more with every commercial break. There is an edge of panic to the disembodied announcer's voice as she orders them back to their seats.

The man in the bar who reminded me of Sean Penn turns out to have been Sean Penn. Jeff Bridges' standing ovation reaches all the way to the top mezzanine. Sandra Bullock's standing ovation only reaches the front rows of our level and stops there. Kathryn Bigelow's standing ovation covers the entire hall except, for some reason, the top right of the first Mezzanine, where I am sitting, where we remain sitting and clap politely.

It all seems to be building up to a crescendo, and then Tom Hanks walks out onto the stage and tells us, with no build-up (if you exclude months of For Your Consideration campaigning) that oh, by the way, *The Hurt Locker* won best picture and goodnight. And we're out.

Up two escalators to the Governors' Ball. I sit and chat to Michael Sheen, who brought his 11 year old daughter Lily, about the sushi dinner we had two days before, interrupted and ended by a police raid. We still have no idea why. (Next morning it will be a front page story on the *New York Times*. They were serving illicit whalemeat.)

I see Henry Selick. He seems relieved that Awards Season is over, and that he can get on with his life.

I feel as if I've sleepwalked invisibly through one of the most melancholy days of my life. There are glamorous parties that evening, but I don't go to any of them, preferring to sit in a hotel lobby with good friends. We talk about the Oscars.

The next morning the back page of the *LA Times* Oscar

supplement is a huge panoramic photograph of the people on the red carpet. Somewhat to my surprise, I see myself standing front and centre, staring down at Rachel McAdams' beautiful watercolour dress, inspecting it for footprints.

ONCE UPON A TIME

… back when animals spoke and rivers sang and every quest was worth going on, back when dragons still roared and maidens were beautiful and an honest young man with a good heart and a great deal of luck could always wind up with a princess and half the kingdom, back then, fairy tales were for adults.

Children listened to them and enjoyed them, but children were not the primary audience, no more than they were the intended audience of *Beowulf*, or the *Odyssey*. J.R.R. Tolkien said, in a robust and fusty analogy, that Fairy tales were like the furniture in the nursery—t was not that the furniture had originally been made for children: it had once been for adults and was only consigned to the nursery when the adults grew tired of it and it became unfashionable.

Fairy tales became unfashionable for adults before children discovered them, though. Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, to pick two people who had a lot to do with the matter, did not set out to collect the stories that bear their name in order to entertain children. They were primarily collectors and philologists, who assembled their tales as part of a life's work that included massive volumes such as *German Legends, German Grammar,* and *Ancient German Law*, and they were surprised when the adults who bought their collections of fairy tales to read to their children began to complain about the adult nature of the content.

The Grimms responded to market pressure and bowdlerised enthusiastically—Rapunzel no longer gave away her meetings with the prince by asking the witch why her belly had swelled so badly that her clothes would not fit (a logical question given that she would soon be giving birth to twins). By the third edition, Rapunzel tells the witch that she is lighter to pull up than the prince was, and the twins, when they turn up, turn up out of nowhere.

The stories that people had told each other to pass the long nights had become children's tales. And there, many people obviously thought, they needed to stay.

But they don't stay there. I think it's because most fairy tales, honed over the years, work so very well. They feel right. Structurally they can be simple, but the ornamentation, the act of

retelling, is often where the magic occurs. Like any form of narrative that is primarily oral in transmission, it's all in the way you tell 'em.

It's the joy of Panto. Cinderella needs her ugly sisters and her transformation scene, but how we get to it changes from production to production. There are traditions of fairy tales. The Arabian Nights gives us one such, the elegant, courtly tales of Charles Perrault gave us the French version. The Grimm brothers gave us a third. We know fairy tales on a level that's so deep it's almost cellular. We encounter them as kids, in retellings or panto. We breathe them. We know how they go.

This makes them easy to parody. Monty Python's Happy Valley, where princes fling themselves to their deaths for love of a princess with wooden teeth, is still my favourite pisstake. The *Shrek* series parodies the Hollywood retellings of fairy tales to diminishing returns, soon making one wistful for the thing itself.

A few years ago, on father's day, my daughters indulged me enough to let me show them a foreign, subtitled, black and white film, Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*. The girls were unimpressed. And then Belle's father entered the Beast's castle, and we watched special effects based on people putting their hands through walls and films being played backwards, and I heard my daughters gasp at the magic on the screen. It was the thing itself, retold with assurance and with brilliance.

We can parody all we like, but the thing itself has power.

Sometimes the Fairy Tale tradition intersects with the literary tradition. Irish writer and playwright Lord Dunsany wrote *The King of Elfland's Daughter* in 1924, in which the elders of the English kingdom of Eld decide they wish to be ruled by a magic lord, and of a princess stolen from Elfland to England. In 1926 Hope Mirrlees, a member of the Bloomsbury set and friend of T.S. Eliot, published *Lud-In-the-Mist*, a quintessentially English novel of transcendent oddness, set in a town on the borders of Fairyland, where illegal traffic in fairy fruit (like the fruit sold in Christina Rossetti's poem, "Goblin Market"), and the magic and poetry and wildness that come with the fruit from over the border change the lives of the townsfolk forever.

Mirrlees' uniquely English vision, which would find itself echoed

seventy years later in Susanna Clarke's magisterial *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell,* was influenced by English folk tales and legends (Mirrlees was the partner of classicist Jane Ellen Harrison), by Christina Rossetti and by a Victorian homicidal lunatic, the painter Richard Dadd, and his strange unfinished masterwork, an obsessively detailed painting called "The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke" – a painting which was itself the subject of a radio play by Angela Carter.

Angela Carter was the first writer I encountered to take fairy tales seriously, in the sense of trying, not to explain them or to make them less or to pin them dead on paper, but to reinvigorate them by retelling them as having power, in the astonishing collection *The Bloody Chamber*. Her lycanthropic and menstrual Red Riding Hood variants were gathered together in Neil Jordan's coming of age fantasy film *Company of Wolves*. She brought the same intensity to her retelling of other fairy tales, from Bluebeard (a Carter favourite) to Puss in Boots, and then created her own perfect fairytale in the story of Fevvers, the winged acrobat in *Nights In the Circus*.

When I was growing up I wanted to read something unapologetically a fairy tale, and just as unapologetically for adults. I remember the delight with which, as a teenager, I stumbled across William Goldman's *The Princess Bride* in a North London library. It was a fairytale with a framing story which claimed that Goldman was editing Silas Morganstern's classic (albeit fictional) and much-loved book into the form in which it was once read to him by his father, who left out the dull bits – a conceit that justified telling adults a fairy tale, and which legitimised the book by making it a retelling, as all fairy stories somehow have to be. I interviewed Goldman in the early 80s, and he described it his favourite of his books and the least known, a position it kept until the 1987 film of the book made it a perennial favourite.

A fairy tale, intended for adult readers. It was a form of fiction I loved and wanted to read more of. I couldn't find one on the shelves, so I wrote one.

I started writing *Stardust* in 1994, but mentally timeslipped about seventy years to do it. The mid 1920s seemed like a time that people had enjoyed writing those sorts of things, back in the days when a fairy tale was just something a writer might write, before there were fantasy shelves in the bookshops, before trilogies and

books “in the great tradition of *The Lord of the Rings*.” This, on the other hand, would be in the tradition of *Lud-In-The-Mist* and *The King of Elfland’s Daughter*. All I was certain of, was that nobody had written books on computers back in the 1920s, so I bought a large book of unlined pages and the first fountain pen I had owned since my schooldays and a copy of Katherine Brigg’s *Dictionary of Fairies,* and I filled the pen and I began.

I wanted a young man who would set out on a quest – in this case a romantic quest, for the heart of Victoria Forester, the loveliest girl in his village. The village was somewhere in England, and was called Wall, after the wall that runs beside it, a dull-looking wall in a normal looking meadow. And on the other side of the wall would be Faerie. *Faerie* as a place or as a quality, rather than as a posh way of spelling fairy. Our hero would promise to bring back a fallen star, one that had fallen on the far side of the wall.

And the star, I knew, would not, when he found it, be a lump of metallic rock. It would be a young woman with a broken leg, in a poor temper, with no desire to be dragged half-way across the world and presented to anyone’s girlfriend.

On the way, we would encounter wicked witches, who would seek the star’s heart to give back their youth, and seven lords (some living, some ghosts) who seek the star to confirm their inheritance. There would be obstacles of all kinds, and assistance from odd quarters.

And the hero would win through, in the manner of heroes, not because he was especially wise or strong or brave, but because he had a good heart, and because it was his story.

I began to write:

There was once a young man who wished to gain his Heart’s Desire.

And while that is, as beginnings go, not entirely novel (for every tale about every young man there ever was or will be could start in a similar manner) there was much about this young man and what happened to him that was unusual, although even he never knew the whole of it.

The voice sounded like the voice I needed – a little stilted and old-fashioned, the voice of a fairy tale. I wanted to write a story that would feel, to the reader, like something he or she had always known. Something familiar, even if the elements that made the story what it was were as original as I could make them.

I was fortunate in having Charles Vess, to my mind the finest fairy artist since Arthur Rackham, as the illustrator of *Stardust,* and many times I found myself writing things (a lion fighting a unicorn, a flying pirate ship) simply because I wanted to see how Charles would paint them, and I was never disappointed.

The book came out, first in illustrated and then in unillustrated form. There seemed to be a general consensus that it was the most inconsequential of my novels. Fantasy fans, for example, wanted it to be an epic, which it took enormous pleasure in not being. Shortly after it was published I wound up defending it to a journalist who had loved my previous novel, *Neverwhere*, particularly the social allegories therein, and had turned *Stardust* upside down and shaken it looking for social allegories and found absolutely nothing of any good purpose in there.

"What's it *for*?" he had asked, which is not a question you expect to be asked, when you write fiction for a living.

"It's a fairy tale," I told him. "It's like an ice cream. It's to make you feel happy when you finish it."

I don't think that I convinced him, not even a little bit. There was a French edition of Stardust some years later which contained translator's notes demonstrating that the whole of *Stardust* was gloss on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, I wish I had read at the time of the interview. I could have referred him to even if I didn't believe a word of it.

Still, the people who wanted fairy tales found it and some of them knew what it was and liked it for being exactly that, and one of those people was film-maker Matthew Vaughn.

I tend to be extremely protective when it comes to adaptations of my work, but after talking to Matthew and to his collaborator, screenwriter Jane Goldman, I felt safe. I enjoyed their screenplay and I really like the film they made – which takes liberties with the plot all over the place, compressing, expanding, changing, simplifying and complicating, all in the space of two hours. (I know

I didn't write a pirate captain performing a can-can in drag, for a start …)

But I think the reason I liked what Matthew and Jane did so much is that they had treated what I had made as a fairy tale—not as a novel, to adapt or to ignore, but as a tale that they loved, to retell with enjoyment. A star still falls, a boy still promises to bring it to his true love, there are still wicked witches and ghosts and lords (although the lords have now become Princes). Matthew and Jane even gave the story an unabashedly happy ending, which is something people tend to do when they retell fairytales.

In the Neil Phillip-edited *Penguin Book of English Folk Tales* we learn that mid 20th Century folklorists had collected an oral story and never noticed it was actually a retelling and simplification of a strange and disturbing children's story written by Victorian writer Lucy Clifford.

I think I would be happy if *Stardust* met with a similar fate, if it continued to be retold long after its author was forgotten, if people forgot that it had once been a book and began their tales of the boy who set out to find the fallen star with "Once Upon A Time …", and finished with "Happily Ever After".

DRESDEN DOLLS

I want to describe Amanda Palmer, half of art-punk cabaret-rock band the Dresden Dolls, in a way that makes her seem like something exotic, but truly, it's hard for me to think of Amanda Palmer as exotic: I know her too well. We've been friends for three years, a couple for nearly two, and engaged to be married for the best part of a year now. In that time I've seen her play gigs of all sizes and all kinds, alone or with bands, playing piano or keyboards and, sometimes, a joke that got so far out of hand it became a Radiohead covers album, the ukulele. I've seen her play grand churches and basement divebars (once on the same night going from chapel to divebar), watched her play a seriously genderbent Emcee in *Cabaret* and half of the pair of conjoined twin sisters known as Evelyn Evelyn.

But I'd never seen the Dresden Dolls. They went on the sort of hiatus that most bands don't come back from about a month before I met Amanda for the first time.

I'd been a lazy sort of Dresden Dolls fan before that. I had their first two major label CDs (but didn't even notice when they released *No, Virginia*, their third). They had a few songs on my STUFF I REALLY LIKE iPod playlist. I'd felt vaguely warm towards them after hearing Amanda was nice to my god-daughters Sky and Winter after a gig, and when I noticed that the Dolls put up the hatemail they had received (complete with occasional hatedrawings) on their website. I tried to see them once, in 2005, when they played Sundance, but I had a press conference when they were on, and I watched Nellie McKay instead.

When I started going out with Amanda I asked about the Dresden Dolls. She told me it was a pity that I'd missed them. They were *so* good, she said. Brian Viglione and her, well, it was special.

I was sure it was. But then she'd talk about Brian, the other half of the Dresden Dolls (Amanda played keyboards, Brian played mostly drums and sometimes guitar), and talk about their time on the road in the way someone talks about a bad marriage she's glad she's out of: they had been together all day and every day, and for 120 minutes of that time they had made the music that made her happy, and the rest of the time they drove each other crazy. They'd

sometimes been lovers, or at least, they'd had a fair amount of sex over that seven years, and they'd sometimes been friends, but mostly they'd been the Dresden Dolls, a band on the road, united in a vision of art as liberation. And then in early 2008, they weren't.

Curious, I'd watched a YouTube video from the end of their final tour. Brian talks about why it was time for them to stop: "Why constantly fight?" he asks. "It's not a marriage. It's a band." Cut to Amanda: "It's like being brother and sister and married and business partners and then put in a box where you have to see each other 24 hours a day," she says. They both look tired and they look done.

But time heals. Or at least it forms scabs.

Which explains why I am standing on the balcony at Irving Plaza at Hallowe'en, at the first gig of the Dresden Dolls reunion tour, watching two young ladies, wearing mostly glitter, hula-hooping in the dark with glowing hula-hoops, watched by an audience of clowns and zombies and mad hatters and such, and I don't actually know where the Hallowe'en costumes end and the dressing up to see the Dresden Dolls begins.

Amanda appears on the balcony to watch the support band, the Legendary Pink Dots. They were her favourite band as a teenager, gave the Dolls their first break. She's happy that they are playing to 1200 people who would never have seen them otherwise. She holds my hand, introduces me to the man who introduced her and Brian at a Hallowe'en party exactly a decade before, and slips back into the shadows.

The next time I see her, she's on the stage wearing a red kimono over a Hallowe'en sweater she bought in June in the Wisconsin Dells. The sweater has a scarecrow on the back. She's wearing a red military cap, and when two songs in, she takes off the sweater and the kimono to play in skin and a black bra, she has the word LOVE written in eyeliner across her chest. Brian is dressed in a black vest, black trousers.

The first strange thing about watching the Dolls is the feeling of immediate recognition. The "Oh, I get it. This is what the songs are *meant* to sound like." As if the drumming makes sense of something, or translates it back into the language it was originally written in.

The second strange thing about the Dolls is this: it's very

obviously a band that consists of two percussion players. They are two people who hit things. She hits the keys, he hits the drums.

And the third, and strangest thing about the Dolls is that they are, when they play, quite obviously, telepathic, like a couple who can finish each other's sentences. They know each other and the songs so well that it's all there, in muscle memory and in their heads and in the subliminal cues that the rest of the world is never going to see. I'd never really got that until now. I'd puzzled over why, if the songs needed a drummer, Amanda didn't simply go and get a drummer. But drumming is only part of what Brian's doing. He's commenting, performing, pantomiming, playing, ying to Amanda's yang. It's a remarkable, virtuoso, glorious thing to see them play together.

They play 'Sex Changes.' They play 'Missed Me', and the audience are pumping their fists, zombies and superheroines and Pennywise the clown, and I think, "I've heard her play this song so many times. I've seen her cross a hall with a marching band behind her playing this song. She's done it with a full orchestra. And this is better than any of them."

Two nights later, on the phone, after the Boston gig, she tells me how irritated she is with people who tell her that they like the Dresden Dolls better than her solo performances, and I feel guilty.

I'm starting to understand why she went on her first tour with a dance troupe, even though it guaranteed the tour would make no money, why she would go on tour as conjoined twins with Jason Webley and a single dress that fitted both of them. I can see how much of what she's been doing on stage was looking for things that replaced, not Brian, but the energy of Brian, putting something else on the stage that's more than just a girl and a keyboard.

She introduces Brian, tells off security for trying to take a fan's camera "We have an open photo policy".

A change of energy: they perform Brecht/Weill's "Pirate Jenny", and Brian acts it out as he conjures the ocean with the drumming. As the Black Freighter ships off to sea, and Jenny whispers that "On it is me", the hall is perfectly quiet.

A girl shouts "I love you Amanda."

A man shouts "I love you Brian."

The Long sisters, friends of Amanda's, both made up dead, Casey

with a bullet-hole in her forehead, Danni's face a mess of stage blood, come and stand beside me.

"We love every single fucking one of you in this whole fucking room," says Amanda, using her favourite intensifier.

The Dresden Dolls play Maurice Sendak's "Pierre". The moral is "Care", and I don't think either Brian or Amanda can stop caring for a moment: about the gig, about the other's playing, about a decade of good times and bad times and petty offenses and anger and disappointment and seven years of really, really good gigs.

Amanda goes into the chords of "Coin-Operated Boy", a song that too often, solo, feels like a novelty song, and, played by Amanda and Brian together it brings the house down: less of a song and more of an act of symbiosis, as they try to wrong-foot each other. It's funny and it's moving and it's like nothing else I've ever seen,

By now Amanda is a mop of hair and skin in a bra, Brian is a topless sheen of sweat and a grin. They launch into Autotune the News's musical version of the 'Double Rainbow' speech, as hundreds of balloons fall, and it's as foolish as it's smart and either way it's perfectly delightful.

'The Jeep Song'. I don't think I've ever heard Amanda play this live. They grab half a dozen fans and pull them up onstage for backing vocals.

Then it's 'Sing'. If there ever was a Dresden Dolls anthem, it's this: a plea to make art, whatever the hell else you do. "Sing for the teacher who told you that you couldn't sing," sings Amanda. The audience sings along, and it feels important, less of a singalong and more like communion or a *credo,* and we're all singing and it's Hallowe'en and I'm up on the balcony slightly drunk, thinking that this is some sort of wonderful, and Amanda's shouting "You motherfuckers, you'll sing some day," and it's all so good, and standing with two dead girls, and we're cheering and happy and it's one of those perfect moments that don't come along in a lifetime that often, the kind of moment you could end a movie on.

The first encore: Brian's on guitar, Amanda's now wearing a golden bra, crawling out onto the speaker-stacks to sing 'Mein Herr' from Cabaret. Then a crazed, wonderful improvisation that slowly crashes into Amanda's song about parents, 'Half Jack'. "They fuck you up, your mum and dad," said Philip Larkin long before either of

the Dresden Dolls were born, in a line that sounded like it could have swaggered out of an Amanda Palmer song, and 'Half Jack' is just all about that. Jack Palmer, Amanda's father is up on the balcony near me, beaming proudly.

A drunk touches my shoulder and congratulates me during the flailing madness of 'Girl Anachronism'. Or I think he's congratulating me. "How do you sleep at night?" he asks. "It must be like catching lightning in a jar."

And I say yes, I suppose it must be, and that I sleep just fine.

The band crashes into 'War Pigs' as a final number, and it's huge and bombastic and heartfelt, and Amanda and Brian are playing like one person with two heads and four hands, and it's all about the beat and the roar, and I watch the crowd in their lunatic, wonderful Hallowe'en costumes drink it in until the final explosive rumble of drums has faded away.

I love the gig. I love everything about it. I feel like I've been made a gift of seven years of Amanda's life, the Dresden Dolls years before I knew her. And I'm in awe of what the Dresden Dolls are, and what they do.

And when it's all over, and it's two a.m. and we are back in the hotel and the adrenaline is fading, Amanda, who has been subdued and awkward since the gig finished, starts crying, silently, uncontrollably, and I hold her, not sure what to say.

"You saw how good it was tonight?" she asks as she cries, and I tell her that, yes. I did, and for the first time it occurs to me how bad it must have got to make her leave something that meant that much to her, that made so many people happy.

Her cheeks are black with wet eye-make-up and it's smearing on the sheets and the pillow as she sobs and I hold her tight, and try with all my might to understand.

INTRODUCTION:
BRIAN ALDISS *HOTHOUSE*

"Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade"

—'The Garden', Andrew Marvell.

Brian Aldiss is now the preeminent English science fiction writer of his generation. He has now been writing for over fifty years with a restless energy and intellect that have taken him from the heart of genre science fiction to mainstream fiction and back again, with explorations of biography, fabulism, and absurdism on the way. As an editor and as an anthologist he has done much to influence the kind of science fiction that people were reading through the sixties and seventies, and was responsible for shaping tastes of readers of Science Fiction in the UK. He has been a critic, and his examinations of the SF field, *Billion Year Spree* and its reinvention, *Trillion Year Spree*, were remarkable descriptions of the genre that Aldiss argued began with Mary Shelley's Frnkenstein and defined as "Hubris clobbered by Nemesis". His career has been enormous: it has recapitulated British SF, always with a ferocious intelligence, always with poetry and oddness, always with passion; while his work outside the boundaries of science fiction, as a writer of mainstream fiction and gained respect and attention from the wider world.

Brian Aldiss is, as I write this, a living author, still working and still writing, and a living author who has restlessly crossed from genre to genre and broken genre lines whenever it suited him; as such he is difficult to put into context, problematic to pigeonhole.

As a young man in the Army Brian Aldiss found himself serving in Burma and in Sumatra, encountering a jungle world unimaginable in grey England, and it is not too presumptuous to suggest that the inspiration for the world of *Hothouse* began with that exposure to the alien, in a novel that celebrates the joy of strange and savage vegetable growth.

He was demobbed in 1948, returned to England and worked in a bookshop while writing science fiction short stories. His first book

was *The Brightfount Diaries*, a series of sketches about bookselling, anhd shortly thereafter sold his first set of science fiction stories in book form – *Space, Time and Nathaniel,* began editing, became a critic and describer of SF as a medium.

Aldiss was part of the second generation of English science fiction writers; he had grown up reading American science fiction magazines, and he understood and spoke the language of "Golden Age" science fiction, combining it with a very English literary point of view. He owed as much to early Robert Heinlein as to H.G. Wells. Still, he was a writer, and not, say, an engineer. The story was always more important to Aldiss than the science. (American writer and critic James Blish famously criticised *Hothouse* for its scientific implausibility; but *Hothouse* delights in its implausibilities, and its impossibilities – the oneiric image of the web-connected moon is a prime example – are its strengths, not weaknesses.)

Hothouse, Aldiss's next major work, like many novels of its time, was written and published serially, in magazine form, in America. It was written as a linked sequence of five novelettes, which were collectively given the Hugo Award (the science fiction field's Oscar) in 1962, for Best Short Fiction. (Robert A Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* took the Hugo for Best Novel.)

There had been prominent English science fiction writers before Aldiss, writing for the American market – Arthur C. Clarke, for example, or Eric Frank Russell – but Aldiss came on the scene after the so-called Golden Age was over, began to write at a point where science fiction was beginning to introspect. Authors like Aldiss and his contemporaries, such as J.G. Ballard and John Brunner, were part of the sea-change that would produce, in the second half of the Sixties, coagulating around the Michael Moorcock-edited *New Worlds*, what would become known as the "New Wave": science fiction that relied on the softer sciences, on style, on experimentation. And although *Hothouse* predates the New Wave, it can also be seen as one of the seminal works that created it, or that showed that the change had come.

Aldiss continued to experiment in form and content, experimenting with prose comedic, psychedelic and literary. His "Horatio Stubbs Saga", published between 1971 and 1978, a sequence of three books which dealt with the youth, education and war experiences in Burma of a young man whose experiences

parallel Aldiss's, were bestsellers, a first for Aldiss. In the early 1980s he returned to classical science fiction with the magisterial *Helliconia* sequence, which imagined a planet with immensely long seasons orbiting two suns, and examined the life forms and biological cycles of the planet, and the effect on the planet's human observers, in an astonishing exercise in world-building.

Restlessly creative, relentlessly fecund, Brian Aldiss has created continually, and just as his hothouse Earth brings forth life of all shapes and kinds, unpredictable, delightful and dangerous, so has Aldiss. His characters and his worlds, whether in his mainstream fiction, his science fiction, or in the books that are harder to classify, such as the experimental, surreal *Report on Probability A,* are always engaged in, to use graphic novelist Eddie Campbell's phrase, the dance of Lifey Death.

Hothouse was Aldiss's second substantial SF novel. It is an uncompromising book, and it exists simultaneously in several science fictional traditions (for it is science fiction, even if the image at the heart of the story, of a Moon and Earth that do not spin, bound together by huge spidery webs, is an image from fantasy).

It is a novel of a far-future Earth, set at the end of this planet's life, when all our current concerns are forgotten, our cities are long gone and abandoned. (The moments in the ruins of what I take to be Calcutta, as the Beauty chants long-forgotten political slogans from a time in our distant future, are a strange reminder of a world millions of years abandoned and irrelevant.)

It is an Odyssey in which our male protagonist, Gren, takes a journey across a world, through unimagined dangers and impossible perils (while Lily-yo, our female protagonist, gets to journey up).

It is a tale of impossible wonders, part of a genre that, like the Odyssey, predates science fiction, its roots in the travellers' tales of Sir John Mandeville and before, tall tales of distant places filled with unlikely creatures, of headless men with their faces in their chests and men like dogs and of a strange form of lamb that was actually a vegetable.

But above and behind all else, *Hothouse* is a novel of conceptual breakthrough—as explained by John Clute and Peter Nicholls in their *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, the moment of conceptual

breakthrough occurs as the protagonist puts his head through the edge of the world to see the cogs and gears and engines turning behind the skies, and the protagonist and the reader begin to understand the previously hidden nature of reality. In Aldiss's first science fiction novel, *Non-Stop*, the jungle is, as we will learn, inside a starship which has been travelling through space for many human generations – so long that the people on the ship have forgotten that they are on a ship. *Hothouse* is a novel of a different kind of conceptual breakthrough, for the various protagonists are more concerned with survival than they are with discovery, leaving the moments of "Aha!" for the reader to discover: the life-cycle of the fly-men, the role of fungus in human evolution, the nature of the world—all these things we learn, and they change the nature of the way we see things.

Hothouse is plotted by place and by event and, over and over, by wonder. It is not a novel of character: the characters exist at arm's length from us, and Aldiss intentionally and repeatedly alienates us from them – even Gren, the nearest thing we have to a sympathetic protagonist, gains knowledge from the morel and becomes estranged from us, forcing us from his point of view into his (for want of a better word) mate Yattmur's. We sympathise with the final humans in their jungle, but they are not us.

There are those who accuse science fiction of favouring idea over characters; Aldiss has proved himself over and over a writer who understands and creates fine and sympathetic characters, both in his genre and in his mainstream work, and yet I think it would be a fair accusation to make about *Hothouse*. Someone who made it would, of course, miss the point, much as someone accusing a Beatles song of being three minutes long and repeating itself in the choruses might have missed the point: *Hothouse* is a cavalcade of wonders and a meditation on the cycle of life, in which individual lives are unimportant, in which a nice distinction between animal and vegetable is unimportant, in which the solar system itself is unimportant, and in the end, all that truly matters is life, arriving here from space as fine particles, and now passing back on again, into the void.

It's the only science fiction novel I can think of that celebrates the process of composting. Things grow and die and rot and new things grow. Death is frequent and capricious and usually unmourned.

Death and rebirth are constant. Life -- and Wonder -- remain.

The Sense of Wonder is an important part of what makes science fiction work, and it is this Sense of Wonder that *Hothouse* delivers so effectively, and at a sustained level that Aldiss would not surpass until his trilogy of novels *Helliconia Spring, Helliconia Summer* and *Helliconia Winter*, almost thirty years later.

The world of *Hothouse* is our own planet, inconceivable gulfs of time from now. The Earth no longer spins. The moon is frozen in orbit, bound to the Earth by web-like strands. The day-side of the Earth is covered by the many trunks of a single banyan tree, in which many vegetable creatures live, and some insects, and Humankind. People have shrunk to monkey-size. They are few in number, as are the other remaining species from the animal kingdom (we will meet a few species, and we will converse with one mammal, Sodal Ye). But animals are irrelevant: the long afternoon of the Earth, as nightfall approaches, is the time of vegetable life, which occupies the niches that animals and birds occupy today, while also filling new niches – of which the traversers, the mile-long space-spanning vegetable spider-creatures are, perhaps, the most remarkable.

The teeming life forms – which, with their Lewis Carroll-like portmanteau names, feel as if they were named by clever children – fill the sunside of the world. Gren, the nearest thing to a protagonist that Aldiss gives us, one letter away from the omnnipresent green, begins as a child, and more animal than human. A smart animal, true, but still an animal – and he ages fast, as an animal might age.

His odyssey is a process of becoming human. He learns that there are things he does not know. Most of his suppositions are wrong, and in his world a mistake will probably kill you. Randomly, intelligently, fortunately, he survives and he learns, encountering a phantasmagoria of strange creatures on the way, including the lotus-eating tummy-bellies, a comic relief turn that gets increasingly dark as the book progresses.

At the heart of the book is Gren's encounter with the morel, the intelligent fungus who is at the same time both the snake in the Garden of Eden and the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, a creature of pure intellect in the same way that Gren and the

humans are creatures of instinct.

Sodel Ye, the descendant of dolphins that Gren will encounter towards the end, and the morel are both intelligent, both know more about the world than the humans, and both are reliant on other creatures to move around and encounter the world, as parasites or symbiotes.

Looking back, one can see why *Hothouse* was unique, and why, almost fifty years ago, it won the Hugo and cemented Aldiss's reputation. Compare *Hothouse* with its most traditionally English equivalent, John Wyndham's disaster novel *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), a "cosy catastophe" (to use Aldiss-the-critic's phrase) in which blinded humans are victimised by huge, ambulatory, deadly plants, band together and learn how to keep themselves safe before, we assume, re-establishing humanity's dominion over the Earth. In the

ENTITLEMENT ISSUES

(FROM MY BLOG)

Hi Neil,

I've recently subscribed to George RR Martin's blog (http://grrm.livejournal.com/) in the hopes of getting some inside information regarding when the next "Song of Ice and Fire" book is due to be released. I love the series but since subscribing to the blog I've become increasingly frustrated with Martin's lack of communication on the next novel's publication date. In fact, it's almost as though he is doing everything in his power to avoid working on his latest novel. Which poses a few questions:

1. With blogs and twitter and other forms of social media do you think the audience has too much input when it comes to scrutinising the actions of an artist? If you had announced a new book two years ago and were yet to deliver do you think avoiding the topic on your blog would lead readers to believe you were being "slack"? By blogging about your work and life do you have more of a responsibility to deliver on your commitments?

2. When writing a series of books, like Martin is with "A Song of Ice and Fire" what responsibility does he have to finish the story? Is it unrealistic to think that by not writing the next chapter Martin is letting me down, even though if and when the book gets written is completely up to him?

Would be very interested in your insight.

Cheers,
Gareth

My opinion ….

1) No

2) Yes, it's unrealistic of you to think George is "letting you down".

Look, this may not be palatable, Gareth, and I keep trying to come up with a better way to put it, but the simplicity of things, at least from my perspective is this:

George R.R. Martin is not your bitch.

This is a useful thing to know, perhaps a useful thing to point out when you find yourself thinking that possibly George is, indeed, your bitch, and should be out there typing what you want to read right now.

People are not machines. Writers and artists aren't machines.

You're complaining about George doing other things than writing the books you want to read as if your buying the first book in the series was a contract with him: that you would pay over your ten dollars, and George for his part would spend every waking hour until the series was done, writing the rest of the books for you.

No such contract existed. You were paying your ten dollars for the book you were reading, and I assume that you enjoyed it because you want to know what happens next.

It seems to me that the biggest problem with series books is that either readers complain that the books used to be good but that somewhere in the effort to get out a book every year the quality has fallen off, or they complain that the books, although maintaining quality, aren't coming out on time.

Both of these things make me glad that I am not currently writing a series, and make me even gladder that the decade that I did write series things, in Sandman, I was young, driven, a borderline workaholic, and very fortunate. (and even then, towards the end, I was taking five weeks to write a monthly comic, with all the knock-on problems in deadlines that you would expect from that).

For me, I would rather read a good book, from a contented author. I don't really care what it takes to produce that.

Some writers need a while to charge their batteries, and then write their books very rapidly. Some writers write a page or so every day, rain or shine. Some writers run out of steam, and need to do whatever it is they happen to do until they're ready to write again. Sometimes writers haven't quite got the next book in a series ready in their heads, but they have something else all ready instead, so they write the thing that's ready to go, prompting cries of outrage from people who want to know why the author could possibly write Book X while the fans were waiting for Book Y.

I remember hearing an upset comics editor telling a roomful of other editors about a comics artist who had taken a few weeks off to paint his house. The editor pointed out, repeatedly, that for the money the artist would have been paid for those weeks' work he could easily have afforded to hire someone to paint his house, and made money too. And I thought, but did not say, "But what if he wanted to paint his house?"

I blew a deadline recently. Terminally blew it. First time in 25 years I've sighed and said, "I can't do this, and you won't get your story." It was already late, I was under a bunch of deadline pressure, my father died, and suddenly the story, too, was dead on the page. I liked the voice it was in, but it wasn't working, and eventually, rather than drive the editors and publishers mad waiting for a story that wasn't going to come, I gave up on it and apologised, worried that I could no longer write fiction.

I turned my attention to the next deadline waiting—a script. It flowed easily and delightfully, was the most fun I've had writing anything in ages, all the characters did exactly what I had hoped they would do, and the story was better than I had dared to hope.

Sometimes it happens like that. You don't choose what will work. You simply do the best you can each time. And you try to do what you can to increase the likelihood that good art will be created.

And sometimes, and it's as true of authors as it is of readers, you have a life. People in your world get sick or die. You fall in love, or out of love. You move house. Your aunt comes to stay. You agreed to give a talk half-way around the world five years ago, and suddenly you realise that that talk is due now. Your last book comes out and the critics vociferously hated it and now you simply don't feel like writing another. Your cat learns to levitate and the matter must be properly documented and investigated. There are deer in the apple orchard. A thunderstorm fries your hard disk and fries the backup drive as well …

And life is a good thing for a writer. It's where we get our raw material, for a start. We quite like to stop and watch it.

The economics of scale for a writer mean that very few of us can afford to write 5,000 page books and then break them up and publish them annually once they are done. So writers with huge stories, or ones that, as Sandman did, grow in the telling, are going to write them and have them published as they go along.

And if you are waiting for a new book in a long ongoing series, whether from George or from Pat Rothfuss or from someone else…

Wait. Read the original book again. Read something else. Get on with your life. Hope that the author is writing the book you want to read, and not dying, or something equally as dramatic. And if he paints the house, that's fine.

And Gareth, in the future, when you see other people complaining that George R.R. Martin has been spotted doing something other than writing the book they are waiting for, explain to them, more politely than I did the first time, the simple and unanswerable truth: George R. R. Martin is not working for you.

Hope that helps.

WHY DEFEND FREEDOM OF ICKY SPEECH?

(FROM MY BLOG)

This is a bit long. Apologies. I'd meant to talk about other things, but I started writing a reply this morning to the letter that follows and I got a bit carried away.

I have questions about the Handley case. What makes lolicon something worth defending? Yaoi, as I understand it, isn't necessarily child porn, but the lolicon stuff is all about sexualizing prepubescent girls, yes? And haven't there been lots of credible psych studies saying that if you find a support community for a fetish, belief or behavior, you're more likely to indulge in it? That's why social movements are so important for oppressed or non-mainstream groups (meaning everything from the fetish community to free-market libertarianism) -and why NAMBLA is so very, very scary (they are, essentially, a support group for baby-rapists.)

The question, for me, is even if we only save ONE child from rape or attempted rape, or even just lots of uncomfortable hugs from Creepy Uncle Dave, is that not worth leaving a couple naked bodies out of a comic? It is, after all, more than possible to imply and discuss these issues (ex. if someone loses their virginity at 14, and chooses to write a comic about it) without having a big ol' pic of 14 yr. old poon being penetrated as the graphic. I also think there's a world of difference between the Sandman story-which depicts child rape as the horrific thing it is (and, I believe, also ends with a horrific death for the pervert, doesn't it?) and depicting child rape as a sexy and titillating thing. I think there is also a difference between acknowledging children's sexuality, and pornography about children that is created for adults. Where on this spectrum does something like lolicon fall? And, again, why do you, personally, think that it should be defended?

Thanks for reading my ramble, and for being accessible to us, and engaged in things like CBLDF. Mostly, they are a fantastic org., but I'm really on the fence with this case …

—Jess

Let me see if I can push you off the fence, a little, Jess. I'm afraid it's going to be a long, and probably a bit rambly answer -- a credo, and how I arrived at that.

If you accept—and I do—that freedom of speech is important, then you are going to have to defend the indefensible. That means you are going to be defending the right of people to read, or to write, or to say, what you don't say or like or want said.

The Law is a huge blunt weapon that does not and will not make distinctions between what you find acceptable and what you don't. This is how the Law is made.

People making art find out where the limits of free expression are by going beyond them and getting into trouble.

Lost Girls by Melinda Gebbie and Alan Moore is several hundred pages long. Describing *Lost Girls*, I said: "The boundary between pornography and erotica is an ambiguous one, and it changes depending on where you're standing. For some, perhaps, it's a matter of whatever turns you on (my erotica, your pornography), for some the distinction occurs in class (i.e. erotica is pornography for rich people). Perhaps it's also something to do with the means of distribution – internet pornography is unquestionably porn, while an Edwardian publication, on creamy paper, bought by connoisseurs, part works bound into expensive volumes, must be erotica."

and I went on to say, of *Lost Girls*:

"It's the kind of smut that would have no difficulty in demonstrating to an overzealous prosecutor that it has unquestionable artistic validity beyond its simple first amendment right to exist."

(Which is the kind of thing you put in a review suspecting that its real purpose may be, one day in the future, to persuade a prosecutor that the case is already lost, and not to bother.)

In with *Lost Girls'* many permutations of sexuality, we find some content featuring fictional characters under the current age of consent. It's a story about sexual awakenings, after all, and few of us wake exactly on our eighteenth birthdays (or whatever your local age of consent or representation happens to be). At one point we find ourselves reading a book within a book, a Beardsleyesque fantasia in which fictional characters discuss the fact that they are

lines on paper, metafictional fantasies, while having underage, incestuous, sex. It's art, and it's brilliant, it's deeply problematic and it makes you think about what porn is and what art is, and where the boundaries are.

The Law is a blunt instrument. It's not a scalpel. It's a club. If there is something you consider indefensible, and there is something you consider defensible, and the same laws can take them both out, you are going to find yourself defending the indefensible.

I was born the day of the conclusion of the Lady Chatterley trial in England, the day it was decided that Lady Chatterley's Lover, with its swearing, buggery and raw sex between the classes, was fit to be published and read in a cheap edition that poor people and servants could read. This was the same England in which, some years earlier, the director of public prosecutions had threatened to prosecute Professor F R Leavis if he so much as referred to James Joyce's Ulysses in a lecture (the DPP was Archibald Bodken, who also banned *The Well of Loneliness)*, in which, when I was sixteen and listening to the Sex Pistols, the publisher of *Gay News* was sentenced to prison for the crime of Criminal Blasphemy, for publishing an erotic poem featuring a fantasy about Jesus.

When I was writing *Sandman*, about eighteen years ago, I had thought that the Marquis de Sade would make a fine character for my French Revolution story (I loved the fact that at the time he was a tubby, asthmatic imprisoned for his refusal to sentence people to death) and realised I ought to read his books, rather than commentaries on them, if I was going to put him in my story. I discovered that the works of DeSade were, at that time, considered obscene and not available in the UK, and that UK Customs had declared them un-importable. I bought them in a Borders the next time I was in the US, and brought them through customs looking guilty. (You can now get De Sade in the UK. The arrival of internet porn in the UK meant that the police stopped chasing things like that.)

The first time I got involved in fund-raising for comics freedom of speech was in late 1983 or early 1984—Knockabout Comics were having one of their frequent battles with UK Customs over what could and could not be imported into the UK. Some comics contained rude words, sex, or the use of marijuana in them, and UK

Customs would seize any comics they objected to, and often other comics in the same shipment, forcing Knockabout to fight long, expensive, court cases to get their comics back. (I remember the outrage when, in 1996, Knockabout imported some Robert Crumb books to accompany a major BBC TV documentary on Crumb, and UK Customs confiscated the books, forcing yet another court case. I'm pretty sure that it was over some autobiographical Crumb work which contained drawings of sexual fantasies including characters who were under 18. As Tony Bennet from Knockabout saidin a recent interview: "The other case was with HM Customs in 1996 over Robert Crumb's comics and explicit sexual imagery. We won this overwhelmingly as well and Customs were kind enough to write to me after the case setting out a list of what sex acts might be shown in comics. I haven't actually framed it but it is a precious document.")

The first time I ever came close actually to sending a publisher to prison for something I had written was about 1986 or 1987, for Knockabout's *Outrageous Tales From The Old Testament*: I'd retold a story from the Book of Judges that contained a rape and murder, and this was held to have contravened a Swedish law depicting images of violence against women. The case was only won when the defense pointed out that the words were from the King James version of the bible, and that the images were a fair representation thereof…

While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, "Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him."

The owner of the house went outside and said to them, "No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this disgraceful thing. Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But to this man, don't do such a disgraceful thing."

But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her

throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go. At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight.

When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, “Get up; let’s go.” But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home.

When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel.

And in each case I’ve mentioned so far, you could rewrite Jess’s letter above, explaining that only perverts would want to read *Lady Chatterley,* or see images of women being abused, or read *Lost Girls* or the works of Robert Crumb, and mentioning that if only one person was saved from a hug from a creepy uncle, or indeed, being raped in the streets, that banning them or prosecuting those who write, draw, publish, sell or—now—own them, is worth it. Because that was the point of view of the people who were banning these works or stopping people reading them. They thought they were doing a good thing. They thought they were defending other people from something they needed to be protected from.

I loved coming to the US in 1992, mostly because I loved the idea that freedom of speech was paramount. I still do. With all its faults, the US has Freedom of Speech. The First Amendment states that you can’t be arrested for saying things the government doesn’t like. You can say what you like, write what you like, and know that the remedy to someone saying or writing or showing something that offends you is not to read it, or to speak out against it. I loved that I could read and make my own mind up about something.

(It’s worth noting that the UK, for example, has no such law, and that even the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that interference with free speech was “necessary in a democratic society” in order to guarantee the rights of others “to protection from gratuitous insults to their religious feelings.”) So when Mike

Diana was prosecuted—and, in 1996, found guilty—of obscenity for the comics in his Zine *Boiled Angel*, and sentenced to a host of things, including (if memory serves) a three year suspended prison sentence, a three thousand dollar fine, not being allowed to be in the same room as anyone under eighteen, over a thousand hours of community service, and was forbidden to draw anything else that anyone might consider obscene, with the local police ordered to make 24 hour unannounced spot checks to make sure Mike wasn't secretly committing Art in the small hours of the morning … that was the point I decided that I knew what was Obscene, and it was prosecuting artists for having ideas and making lines on paper, and that I was henceforth going to do everything I could to support the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. Whether I liked or approved of what Mike Diana did was utterly irrelevant. (For the record, I didn't like the text parts of *Boiled Angel*, but did like the comics, which were personal and had a raw power to them. And somewhere in the sprawling basement magazine collection I have *Boiled Angel 7* and *8*, which I read back then to find out what was being prosecuted, and for owning which I could, I assume, now be arrested …)

The first time the CBLDF did anything to defend one of my comics, it was the Death Talks About Life comic at the back of DEATH: THE HIGH COST OF LIVING, in which we see Death putting a condom on a banana and talking about how not to get pregnant, diseased, or dead. The Chief of Police in (if memory serves) Jacksonville Florida ordered a comic shop not to sell it, because she thought it was obscene and encouraged teen sex. In this case, it only took a letter from the CBLDF legal counsel, Burton Joseph, to the Jackson-ville Police Department, explaining the concept of the First Amendment (and, by implication, that there was an organisation prepared to defend this stuff) and they shut up and went away. (That's what most of the CBLDF activity consists of —small, quiet things that stop the threats to stores or creators ever getting to a court of law.) From the police chief's point of view, Death Talks About Life was obscene. She wanted it off the shelves. She wanted people protected from it.

In this case you obviously have read lolicon, and I haven't. I don't know whether you're writing from personal experience here, and whether you have personally been incited to rape children or give inappropriate hugs by reading it. (I assume you haven't. I assume

that Chris Handley, with his huge manga collection, wasn't either. I've read books that claimed that exposure to porn causes rape, but have seen no statistical evidence that porn causes rape—and indeed have seenclaims that the declining number of US rapes may be due to the wider availability of porn. Honestly, I think it's a red herring in First Amendment matters, and I'll leave it for other people to argue about.) Still, you seem to want lolicon banned, and people prosecuted for owning it, and I don't. You ask, What makes it worth defending? and the only answer I can give is this: Freedom to write, freedom to read, freedom to own material that you believe is worth defending means you're going to have to stand up for stuff you don't believe is worth defending, even stuff you find actively distasteful, because laws are big blunt instruments that do not differentiate between what you like and what you don't, because prosecutors are humans and bear grudges and fight for re-election, because one person's obscenity is another person's art.

Because if you don't stand up for the stuff you don't like, when they come for the stuff you do like, you've already lost.

The CBLDF will defend your First Amendment right as an adult to make lines on paper, to draw, to write, to sell, to publish, and now, to own comics. And that's what makes the kind of work you don't like, or don't read, or work that you do not feel has artistic worth or redeeming features worth defending. It's because the same laws cover the stuff you like and the stuff you find icky, wherever your icky line happens to be: the law is a big blunt instrument that makes no fine distinctions, and because you only realise how wonderful absolute freedom of speech is the day you lose it.

(And let it be understood that I think that child pornography, and the exploitation of actual children for porn or for sex is utterly wrong and bad, because actual children are being directly harmed. And also that I think that prosecuting as "child pornographers" a 16 and 17 year old who were legally able to have sex, because they took a sexual photograph of themselves and emailed it to themselves is utterly, insanely wrong, and a nice example of the law as blunt instrument.)

HARVEY AWARDS SPEECH

I'm in the middle of writing a novel currently, and unlike the pleasant social world of comics where, if you're me, you talk on a daily basis to editors and artists to letterers or colourists or cover artists, writing a novel is something that's done solo. It's just me and a lot of pieces of paper. Even my family leaves me alone to write.

This means that when finally offered the opportunity to speak, I'm liable to begin with apologising for being so out of practice, and then to start blithering unstoppably.

Forgive me if I blither.

Harvey Kurtzman was a genius. And that was not what made his work special. We've had a number of geniuses in comics, and we have a number of them still. Some brilliant work is cold. There are some things one admires, but one cannot love.

Kurtzman was someone who was doing what he wanted to do, enjoying himself. Happy to rewrite the rules because there were no rules, as long as you were creating art.

Most of us are happy to have created just one world class, life-changing work. Harvey did it a number of times. He is one of the people who created the world in which we exist.

He endured senate hearings, commercial exploitation, watching some of his most treasured creations fail. Along the way he created art that will remain forever, and inspired a list of people longer than your arm, all of whom watched Harvey strive toward excellence, break new ground, tell new stories. Some of them went on to become cartoonists or writers or filmmakers – people like R. Crumb or Terry Gilliam. Others simply discovered that the worlds and visions that Harvey Kurtzman gave them changed their world, in the way that real art does. It gave them new eyes. Perhaps a more cynical view of the world, certainly a more pragmatic one. Harvey's worlds were, at least in their EC incarnations, never fair. You got what you needed, and what you deserved, and you normally got it in the neck.

I was fortunate enough to have met Harvey Kurtzman, in 1990, at the Dallas Fantasy Fair. He told me how much he appreciated what

I was doing, which I took, not as any indication that he had read anything I had written, but as him expressing his pride in a younger generation of comics writers and artists. That there were bright young creators out there who cared about comics as an artform mattered to Harvey Kurtzman. He'd invested his life in the crazy belief that comics were art, and not anything to apologise for, and that investment reaped its dividends in the lives it influenced, in those of us who believed it too, and acted accordingly.

When, as a young man, my dream of getting to make comics started to become a reality, I started to meet comics people. These were the people who I had looked up to in my teens, in my twenties, as gods upon the earth. These were the names that I conjured with. I would read everything I could about them when I was growing up, in a time when there was precious little about them to read, and even less of what they had done still in print.

And now I was to meet them.

And I discovered, to my surprise, that quite a lot of them were cranky old jews. Or wannabe cranky old jews—they seemed to be enjoying themselves too much to be properly cranky, and not all of them were actually Jewish.

And now, approaching my mid-forties, eighteen years after writing my first comic, I find myself heading down the conveyor belt towards cranky old Jewhood. I'm at the age where they start to give you lifetime achievement awards, and you rather wish they wouldn't, because it may be some kind of a hint that it's time for you to sit down and shut up.

It is the prerogative, however, of those who are one day to be cranky old jews to give advice to the generations that will follow them. And while some of you are my contemporaries, and others are my seniors, I shall advise anyway.

My first piece of advice is this:

Ignore all advice.

In my experience, most interesting art gets made by people who don't know the rules, and have no idea that certain things simply aren't done: so they do them. Transgress. Break things. Have too much fun.

2) Read outside of comics. Learn from places that aren't comics.

Don't do what anyone else is doing. Steal from places that people aren't looking. Go outside. Many years ago, when it was almost unheard of for foreigners to write American comics, people used to ask why British Writers were different. I had no idea. I did notice that when I spoke socially to people like Alan Moore, or to Grant Morrison, we mostly weren't talking about comics. We were talking about avant garde forms of poetry, about non-fiction writers, about weird things we'd found. Grant Morrison discovered a long-forgotten Victorian children's author named Lucy Clifford, who wound up influencing both his Doom Patrol and, much later, my Coraline. We loved comics, but they weren't all we knew. There's a whole cool world out there. Use it.

3) Read all the comics you can. Know your comics.

The history of comics is not a long one, and it's not unknowable. We can argue about whether or not hieroglyphics were the earliest comics, or the Bayeux tapestry or what. At the end of the day, we don't have a long history. You can learn it. You can, these days more easily that you ever could before, study it. And the high points of the last century in comics are quite astonishing. There are things that Winsor McCay did in Little Nemo that are still unsurpassed. Things in Herriman's Krazy Kat that are jawdropping. There are things, as a writer and as a storyteller, that Harvey Kurtzman did, that Will Eisner did, that Robert Crumb did that you should familiarise yourself with and learn from.

There's more classic and important material in print now in affordable editions than there has ever been. Let it inspire you. See how high people have taken the medium in the past, and resolve to take it further.

Isaac Newton, even as he created the foundations of huge swatches of science, said that if he had seen a little further than most men, it was because he was standing on the shoulders of giants.

We've inherited an art-form from giants, some of whom were cranky old jews, and some of whom weren't jews, and some of whom weren't even cranky.

Another piece of advice:

I've learned over the years that everything is more or less the same amount of work, so you may as well set your sights high and

try and do something really cool.

There are other people around who can do the mediocre, meat-and-potatoes work that anybody can do. So let them do that. You make the art that only you can make. You tell the stories only you can tell.

As a solution to various problems you may encounter upon the way, let me suggest this:

Make Good Art.

It's very simple. But it seems to work. Life fallen apart? Make Good art. True love ran off with the milkman? Make Good Art. Bank foreclosing? Make Good art.

Keep moving, learn new skills. Enjoy yourself.

Most of the work I've done that's been highly regarded has happened in places where, when I was working on it I tended to suspect that it would go one of two ways – either I was doing something cool that, if I was lucky, people would talk about for some time, or I was doing something that people would have a particularly good laugh about, in the places where they gather to discuss the embarrassing mistakes of those who went before them.

Be proud of your mistakes. Well, proud may not be exactly the right word, but respect them, treasure them, be kind to them, learn from them.

And, more than that, make them.

Make mistakes. Make great mistakes, make wonderful mistakes, make glorious mistakes. Better to make a hundred mistakes than to stare at a blank piece of paper too scared to do anything wrong, too scared to do anything.

Critics will grumble. Of course they will. That's one of the functions of critics. As an artist it's your job to give them ulcers, and perhaps even something to get apoplectic about.

Most of the things I've got right over the years, I got right because I'd got them wrong first. It's how we make art.

As a keynote speaker last year for the Eisners I said that compared to where I dreamed that comics could be, as a young journalist in 1986, we're in a Golden Age.

And I was taken to task in certain circles for this, as if I'd said that this was as good as things could get, or that there was nothing

at all wrong with the world of comics. Obviously neither statement is true.

We're in 2004, the year that Dave Sim and Gerhard finished the 300 issues of Cerebus, the year that Jeff Smith completed Bone, both monumental tasks, both unique. Cerebus cannot be compared with anything anyone else has done. It's unparalleled in its evolving portrait of its subject and its subject's creator. Bone is, beginning to end, the best fantasy tale anyone's told in comics. That in itself gives me hope for the future.

It's the year that my daughter Maddy discovered Betty and Veronica, and that gives me another kind of hope. Any world in which a nine year old girl can become, off her own bat, a mad keen comics collector because she cares about the stories, is a good one.

I think the Internet is changing things.

Twice in the last eighteen months the Internet has been used as a way of rallying around publishers who needed help. Good publishers who had cash flow problems, and who put out appeals for assistance, letting people know that now was the time to buy. And people did. The Internet meant that information was given to the people who needed it.

Last week, a web-cartoonist with a large readership, who had told his readership that he would really like to quit his dayjob and devote the time to the comic, if they could raise the same money he made in his dayjob. His readers dipped into their pockets, five dollars here and ten dollars there, and delivered the annual wages from his dayjob.

The internet gives your comics cheap access to the world, without printing bills. Of course, it still hasn't worked out a reliable way to pay people for their work, but Randy Milholland quit his job yesterday to do Something Positive full-time, and Top Shelf and Fantagraphics are both still here.

Despite the grumblers, I think the Internet is a blessing, not a curse.

And if I have a prediction it's simply this: the often-predicted Death of Comics won't happen. There will be more booms and there will be more busts. Fads and fashions turn up in comics, as with all things, and, as fads and fashions always do, they end, normally in tears.

But comics is a medium, not a fad. It's an art-form, not a fashion. The novel was once so called because it was indeed something novel, but it's lasted, and I think, after a few shakedowns, the graphic novel, in whatever form, will do likewise.

Already some things are changing:

When I started writing about comics, before I ever began to write comics, I wanted a world in which comics would simply be regarded as a medium like any other, and in which we were accorded the same respect that any other medium was given. The amount of respect that novels and films and great works of art got. I wanted us to get literary awards. I wanted comics to turn up on the shelves of bookshops, and to sit next to books on the bestseller lists. Maybe one day a comic could come out and be on the NYT bestseller list.

We've got all that. And I don't think it's important after all.

Right now I actually believe that the best thing about comics may well be that it is a gutter medium. We do not know which fork to use, and we eat with our fingers. We are creators of a medium, we create art in an art-form, which is still alive, which is powerful, which can do things no other medium can do.

I don't believe that a fraction of the things that can be done with comics have yet been done.

For now, I think we've barely scratched the surface.

And I think that's exciting. I don't know where comics as a medium will go in the future. But I want to be amazed, and I hope that I shall be.

And I trust that one day when you, whatever age, race, gender, or ethnicity you may lay claim to, are in your turn, a cranky old jew up here giving a speech, that that will always remain true.

NEBULA AWARD SPEECH

Welcome, to the Nebula Awards, on this, the 40th anniversary of the founding of the SFWA. That's the Ruby Anniversary, for anyone wondering what sort of gift to give.

And forty years is a very short time in the life of a genre.

I suspect that if I had been given the opportunity to address a convocation of the most eminent writers of science fiction and fantasy when I was a young man—say around the age of 23 or 24, when I was bumptious and self-assured and a monstrous clever fellow—I would have a really impressive sort of speech prepared. It would have been impassioned and heart-felt. An attack on the bastions of science fiction, calling for the tearing down of a number of metaphorical walls and the building up of several more. It would have been a plea for quality in all ways—the finest of fine writing mixed with the reinvention of SF and Fantasy as genres. All sorts of wise things would have been said.

And now I'm occupying the awkward zone that one finds oneself in between receiving one's first lifetime achievement award and death, and I realise that I have much less to say than I did when I was young.

Gene Wolfe pointed out to me, five years ago, when I proudly told him, at the end of the first draft of *American Gods*, that I thought I'd figured out how to write a novel, that you never learn how to write a novel. You merely learn how to write the novel you're on. He's right, of course. The paradox is that by the time you've figured out to do it, you've done it. And the next one, if it's going to satisfy the urge to create something new, is probably going to be so different that you may as well be starting from scratch, with the alphabet.

At least in my case, it feels as I begin the next novel knowing less than I did the last time.

So. A ruby anniversary. Forty years ago, in 1965, the first Nebula Awards were handed out. I thought it might be interesting to remind you all of the books that were Nominees for Best Novel in 1965 ….

All Flesh is Grass by Clifford D. Simak
The Clone by Theodore Thomas & Kate Wilhelm
Dr. Bloodmoney by Philip K. Dick
Dune by Frank Herbert
The Escape Orbit by James White
The Genocides by Thomas M. Disch
Nova Express by William Burroughs
A Plague of Demons by Keith Laumer
Rogue Dragon by Avram Davidson
The Ship That Sailed the Time Stream by G. C. Edmonson
The Star Fox by Poul Anderson
The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch by Philip K. Dick

I love that list. It has so much going on—SF and Fantasy of all shapes and sizes, jostling side by side. Traditional and iconoclastic fictions, all up for the same lucite block.

1965 Nebula Winners …

Novel: *Dune* by Frank Herbert
Novella: "He Who Shapes" by Roger Zelazny and "The Saliva Tree" by Brian Aldiss (tie)
Novelette: "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth" by Roger Zelazny
Short Story: "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" by Harlan Ellison

… it was a good year.

Forty years on and we're now living in a world in which SF has become a default mode. In which the tropes of SF have spread into the world. Fantasy in its many forms has become a staple of the media. And we, as the people who were here first, who built this city on pulp and daydreams and four-colour comics, are coming to terms with a world in which we find several things they didn't have to worry about in 1965.

For a start, today's contemporary fiction is yesterday's near-future SF. Only slightly weirder and with no obligation to be in any way

convincing or consistent.

It used to be easy to recognise SF written by mainstream authors. The authors always seemed convinced that this was the first novel to tackle Faster Than Light travel, or downloadable intelligence, or time paradoxes or whatever. The books were clunky and proud of themselves and they reinvented the wheel and did it very badly, with no awareness of the body of SF that preceded them.

That's no longer true. Nowadays things that were the most outlandish topics of SF are simply building blocks for stories, and they aren't necessarily ours. Our worlds have moved from being part of the landscape of the imagination to being part of the wallpaper.

There was a battle for the minds of the world, and we appear to have won it, and now we need to figure out what we're doing next.

I always liked the idea that SF stood for Speculative Fiction, mostly because it seemed to cover everything, and include the attitude that what we were doing involved speculation. It was about thinking, about inquiring, about making things up.

The challenge now is to go forward and to keep going forward: to tell stories that have weight and meaning. It's saying things that mean things, and using the literature of the imagination to do it.

And that's something that each of us, and the writers who will come afterwards, are going to have to struggle with, to reinvent and make SF say what we need it to say.

Anyway.

Something that, after half a lifetime in this field and a lifetime as a reader, that I think worth mentioning and reminding people of, is that we are a community.

More than any field in which I've been involved, the people in the worlds of SF have a willingness to help each other, to help those who are starting out.

When I was 22, half a lifetime ago, I went to a Brian Aldiss signing at London's Forbidden Planet. After the signing, at the pub next door, I sat next to a dark, vaguely elfin gentleman named Colin Greenland who seemed to know a lot about the field and who, when I mentioned that I had written a handful of stories, asked to see them. I sent them to him, and he suggested a magazine that he'd

done some work for that might publish it. I wrote to that magazine, cut the story down until it met their wordcount requirements, and they published it.

That short story being published meant more to me at the time than anything had up to that point, and was more glorious than most of the things that have happened since. (And Colin and I have stayed friends. About ten years ago, he sent me, without the author's knowledge, a short story by someone he'd met at a workshop named Susanna Clarke … but that's another story.)

So. Twenty two years ago … Six months later I was in the process of researching my first genre book. It was a book of SF and Fantasy quotations, mostly the awful ones, called Ghastly Beyond Belief.

—and I found myself astonished and delighted by the response within the field. Fans and authors suggested choice works by authors they loved or didn't. I remember the joy of getting a postcard from Isaac Asimov telling me that he couldn't tell the good from the bad in his works, and giving me blanket permission to quote anything of his I wanted to.

I felt that I'd learned a real lesson back then, and it's one that continues to this day.

What I saw was that the people who make up SF, with all its feuds—the roots of most of which are, like all family feuds, literally, inexplicable—are still a family, and fundamentally supportive, and particularly supportive to the young and foolish.

We're here tonight because we love the field.

The Nebulas are a way of applauding our own. They matter because we say they matter, and they matter because we care.

They are something to which we can aspire. They are our way—the genre's way, the way of the community of writers—of thanking those who produced sterling work, those who have added to the body of SF, of Fantasy, of Speculative Fiction.

The Nebulas are a tradition, but that's not why they're important.

The Nebulas Awards are important because they allow the people who dream, who speculate, who imagine, to take pride in the achievements of the family of SF. They're important because these lucite blocks celebrate the ways that we, who create futures for a living, are creating our own future.

CONJUNCTIONS

Jupiter and Venus hung like grapes in the evening sky,
frozen and untwinkling,
You could have reached and up and picked them.

And the trout swam.

Snow muffled the world, silenced the dog,
silenced the wind …

The man said, I can show you the trout. He was
glad of the company.
He reached into their tiny pool, rescued a dozen, one by one,
sorting and choosing,
dividing the sheep from the goats of them.

And this was the miracle of the fishes,
that they were beautiful. Even when clubbed and gutted,
insides glittering like jewels. See this? he said, the trout heart
pulsed like a ruby in his hand. The kids love this.
He put it down, and it kept beating.
The kids, they go wild for it.

He said, we feed the guts to the pigs. They're pets now,
They won't be killed. See? We saw,
huge as horses they loomed on the side of the hill.

And we walk through the world trailing trout hearts like dreams,
wondering if they imagine rivers, quiet summer days,
fat foolish flies that hover or sit for a moment too long.
We should set them free, our trout and our metaphors:

You don't have to hit me over the head with it.
This is where you get to spill your guts.

You killed in there, tonight.

He pulled her heart out. Look, you can see it there, still beating. He said,

See this? This is the bit the kids like best. This is what they come to see.

Just her heart, pulsing, on and on. It was so cold that night, and the stars were all alone.

Just them and the moon in a luminous bruise of sky.

And this was the miracle of the fishes.